Farewell Andalucia

by Geoffrey Clarfield (September 2015)

Moorish Ruin, the Alhambra, Granada

A Forty-Year Wait

Forty years ago, I drove with a bunch of friends from Fez in Morocco, through Spain to Paris. It was the hottest part of the summer and after taking the ferry from Tangier to Algeciras we drove along the Spanish coast, up into the eastern desert of Almeria, famous venue for the filming of Sergio Leone's *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, down to Torremolinos, where the uglification of the Costa del Sol was well underway, up to Barcelona and over the border into France and onwards to Paris.

In Spain, the sky was bluer than I had ever imagined, and the villages and houses whiter that I had thought possible. The Spaniards were reserved, and looked out at me from eyes that still bore the fear of their leader. This was Spain in 1974, and their dictator Franco had one more year to live.

By that time I had already heard some Flamenco. I had read Daniel Pohren's two books about the genre and I had managed to get some authentic, historic vinyl recordings of old Flamenco giants from before WWII, such as Pastora Pavon (*La Niña de Los Peines*) and her guitar playing brother. As I child, I had seen Jose Greco live and realized there was something substantial to the kind of music he played.

As a teenager, my classical guitar teacher had given me one of the earliest books on Flamenco guitar and I managed to learn a few very basic pieces. My favorite was and remains the Peteneras form. As well, I had also carefully listened to Alan Lomax's 1959 Andalucian recordings on vinyl, which were available to me as an undergraduate student of ethnomusicology.

The Jewish people had had a long and tortured relationship with Spain, having had a continuous residence there from the time of the Romans, until their final expulsion by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in 1492. I also knew that at the

time of my trip, Jewish and Israeli scholars were uncovering the complex story of the Jews of Spain and the Sephardic diaspora, in all its historical and ethnographic complexity. I vowed to soon return and visit the great cities of Andalucia, Seville, Cordoba and Granada, and get the feel of the place and people. It took me four decades to get back.

Out of Africa

Market at the foot of Kilimanjaro

It looked perfectly reasonable on paper, but when I woke up at four in the morning at my hotel beside the international airport at the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, and took the shuttle to get my first flight to Nairobi, I realized that I had prepared an itinerary that would tire even the most motivated 25 year old traveller.

I managed to get my bags checked, got the airplane to Nairobi, walked across the airport to the Kenya Airways gates, got my plane to Amsterdam, arrived in Amsterdam and soon after, boarded the plane to Madrid. At the airport in Madrid, I managed to find the shuttle to Terminal Four, found the train office, bought my subway and train tickets and walked downstairs, where I waited for the subway. I arrived at the train station fifteen minutes before the last train to Seville and found my seat. I was exhausted but also a bit exhilarated.

Here I was, forty years later on the night train to Seville. I could not see the countryside outside of my window because of the winter darkness and instead, I imagined a landscape of rolling hills, white villages and endless olive groves. But, the woman who sat beside me amply compensated me for the darkness.

She looked as if she was in her late sixties. She had a tired face, was slightly overweight and was talking non-stop on the phone to a variety of friends and relatives. When she was not talking, she was watching short clips of young women doing marvelous things with horses, in what is the Sevillean style of equestrian display. Seeing that I was interested, she showed me many clips and explained that her grandchildren were expert riders. One of the pictures showed a granddaughter simply lying on the back of her horse, as one might do beside one’s pet dog, beside a fireplace in winter. But to remind me that these were horses and not dogs, she also showed me pictures of her granddaughter’s legs

after having been kicked by a horse. The bruises were quite distinctive.

She asked me what I do, and in my very basic Spanish I explained that I took people to the Serengeti to see wild animals. I showed her pictures of giraffes, lions and zebra and she was quite impressed. She was also sure that soon a trolley would arrive selling tea and water, as I was feeling somewhat dehydrated from all my frantic travelling, but it never showed up. I got up and found the food coach, bought my bottle of water and downed it in one go. I had asked for water, "*agua*." Somehow, the connotations of the word in Spanish reminded me of a famous Flamenco song, "*Como el Agua*," where the author of the lyric compares his passion to that of water, implying flowing water, I presumed.

I went back to my seat and before we got up to leave the station my neighbour told me that her sister was about to undergo serious surgery, and that she was very worried. I expressed my sympathy and we said goodbye. There was a sign nearby that requested all passengers to use their phones in between trains and not to disturb the other passengers. For my part, I was delighted that my neighbour had displayed the classic individualism for which Spaniards are noted and their skepticism towards all and any authority. I arrived at the station in Seville, found a cab, drove to my hotel and was warmly welcomed by my two friends and travelling companions. We compared travel stories; I took a hot shower and got a fine night's sleep. I was in the heart of Andalucia.

Morning in Seville

Spanish Fans for Sale in Seville

My hotel room was small and simple. It had a high ceiling, a single bed, a small table and a cupboard. It was surrounded on the inside by Moorish tiles that rose from the floor to shoulder length and my window looked out into a tiny internal courtyard whose glass ceiling let in the clear morning light of the Mediterranean winter.

I imagined that this was the kind of room that monks and nuns lived in when they transformed the Synagogues, Yeshivas and Islamic madrasas of the conquered kingdom of Grenada in 1492. It was pleasant and there was hot water but, it had a monastic feel to it. Perhaps that was because none of the windows opened onto the street.

I got dressed and went across the hall to the breakfast area. The walls of the stairs were also adorned with Moorish tiles and the stairway was broken by alcoves with small copies of Italian Renaissance marble sculptures, including a reasonable imitation of Michelangelo's statue of King David.

I joined my travelling companions for coffee and breakfast. The hotel was filled with Spaniards. They all seemed to sit and move like a modest version of Flamenco dancers. They did not slouch. They stood and sat erect, carried themselves with composure and they all looked like they had just stepped out of a Goya or Velasquez painting. At the same time, their body language was animated and their tone of voice was warm and demonstrative.

And so to invert the insight, when I now look at Velasquez or Goya paintings, I remind myself that the poses of these former, usually Spanish aristocrats, with their implications of pride, distance and reserve, may hide a more animated side of life which would have expressed itself among close intimates, when they were enjoying the privacy of their personal lives. It also gave me a better understanding of the national epic, that first modern novel, Don Quixote, by the 16th century writer Cervantes. Cervantes had seen his fair share of action, having fought the Turks and having been wounded defending the empire, the King and the church.

Yes, the greatest book in Spanish literature is in essence a form of stand up comedy that would make Cervantes comfortable among the Jewish comedians of New York city and the borsht belt, for Quixote makes fun of everything that the Spanish once, and often still, take seriously-hierarchy, the aristocracy, personal honour, chivalry, the church, chastity and all the so called virtues as established by the medieval Church of Catholic Spain, and which were so systematically violated by their Inquisition.

Had Cervantes lived in our times, he would no doubt have made a complete mockery of the Inquisition, but he well knew that he was already pushing the limits of his time with his sarcastic classic. I suspect that much of Cervantes's genius was that he took that animated, egalitarian and realistic side of Spanish personal relations and made them public for the first time.

And so, like Don Quixote we made our morning plans. We had seen a brochure in English called "Live the City," which provided free tours of the major monuments

and we decided to join up. We were told to be at our hotel at 10:15, ready for a walking tour of the main sites of old Seville. A young, animated woman named Maria picked us up and walked around the block to collect the next group from the next hotel. We did this a few times and Maria kept on saying, with an animated smile, “This is the last hotel we stop at.” The last hotel was actually a block away from our own hotel. We had just spent forty minutes making an almost complete circle. We did not really mind, for this was our first step out of our hotel and we passed shops and elegant Moorish thresholds and grated metal doors, that led into the courtyard of people’s homes, all nestled in between a church or two, each of which looked as if it was centuries old.

We then came to a square where we divided up into language groups. Maria said goodbye and our guide, Danielo showed up. A young man in his late twenties or early thirties with multiple body piercings, he explained the outline of the tour to us, that Seville had 360 days of sunshine and, that it was as ancient as the Romans and once had a large population of Muslims and Jews. But, given his enthusiasm to please largely North American and European tourists, he neglected to say that Spain is fast becoming home to a growing number of Muslims intent on reversing the reconquest of 500 years ago, and reclaiming Andalucia for Islam. He also said, again and again, “I will not talk about politics,” and never quite stopped making political remarks after each and every site and explanation.

We visited the Seville Cathedral and the Giralda, formerly a minaret of the mosque beside which the cathedral had been built, and whose ground plan forms the outside courtyard of the cathedral, bound by massive walls and the old Moorish gates, which once led in and out of the mosque. We were told that to get to the top of the minaret, that is the Giralda, the Arab ruler of the time did not build stairs, but a series of ramps which allowed the muezzin in charge of the call to prayer to ride his horse to the top, five times a day, thus saving him much time and effort. The ramps are still open and many of our tour members climbed to the top. As I had injured my knee hunting in Tanzania with a tribe that lived near Lake Eyasi, I did not make the climb. I was told that the view was phenomenal.

We walked along the river, the Guadalquivir, and watched young people rowing their boats in the British, Oxbridge style. We walked passed the building of the Plaza of the Americas whose palatial Arabian fantasy architecture had inspired film director David Lean to use as the Cairo command offices of the British

forces in Egypt during WW1, during the making of his film, *Lawrence of Arabia*. I immediately turned to my companions and recited the following dialogue, imitating Peter O'Toole's slightly sandy voice and the deep clipped military style of actor Jack Hawkins, who played the gruff but brilliant general, Allenby.

Plaza of the Americas, Seville

General Allenby: I believe your name will be a household word when you'll have to go to the War Museum to find who Allenby was. You're the most extraordinary man I've ever met!
T.E. Lawrence: Leave me alone!
General Allenby: What?
T.E. Lawrence: Leave me alone!
General Allenby: Well, that's a feeble thing to say.
T.E. Lawrence: I know I'm not ordinary.
General Allenby: That's not what I'm saying…
T.E. Lawrence: All right! I'm extraordinary! What of it?

My cinematic reverie was interrupted by the military sound of massed snare drums, horns and the eerie cry of a ram's horn, punctuating the air like the Shofar that is blown in Jewish synagogues to signify the start of the New Year. On the broad pedestrian walkway beside the plaza, scores of young men and a few young women were slowly marching, ten to fifteen abreast, playing brass instruments and drums in a mournful, steady and stately way. It sounded like a funeral march and in a sense, it was.

These were men who belonged to one of those Catholic confraternities that carry the massive statues of Jesus and the Saints through the streets of Seville during Holy Week each Easter. This was a rehearsal. As I followed the procession, we were met by a double phalanx of young men with white head coverings, that made them look like extras in a 1950s sword and sandal Bible film.

They were carrying a heavy palanquin without a statue of the saint. I could see how heavy it was, and the seriousness with which they carried out their task in preparation for the big week that was coming soon. The man with the ram's horn

was wearing a green jacket with an inscription on the back that read, “Guardia Judea.” I suspect that was the name of the group who had taken their name from a biblical passage or, a traditional story of the Crucifixion.

Preparing for Holy Week, Seville

Given the look on the faces of the participants, I could not see any sign that this was “just a gig” or part of “tradition.” No, I got that feeling of true religious devotion that emanated from the crowd. As they passed me by, in a slow, steady, medieval march I realized that had Cervantes been standing there beside me, he would not have been welcome.

Danielo finished our tour with a story. After having shown us most of the places that had inspired the novel Carmen, we stood outside a circular fountain. He told us that before the most recent financial crisis, the city had promised to refurbish the fountain and the toilets that went with it. But when they found out that they did not have the money to do so, they re opened the fountain without the urinals. This prompted a public outcry.

It was rumored that the late Duchess of Alba had stolen them, although why this should be the case, given that she was one of richest aristocrats of the world with more official titles than Queen Elizabeth, we were not told. Danielo did tell us that he went to her mansion to find out if she had taken them. He rang the bell outside of the main gate but told us, in frustration, that no one opened the door. We all laughed. It was not a story worthy of Don Quixote, but it did have the ring of Sancho Panza.

The Duchess of Alba was the most eccentric of 20th century Spanish aristocrats. She was married to a much younger man, had undergone cosmetic surgery that made her look like a character out of the film, Planet of the Apes, loved to party, loved Flamenco and was a good Flamenco dancer. Despite her close connection to the royal family of Spain, she lived a flamboyant and libidinous life. When thinking of her recent demise one can only recall the sentiment of Sancho Panzo when he laments that, “Dying is such a waste of good health.” Perhaps she really did steal the toilets.

Dinner

The Giralda of Seville Cathedral-Formerly a Moorish Minaret

We had decided to dine like Cervantes. We knew that we could not find food that was five hundred years old, and had we done so, we would have donated it to a local ethnographic Museum. Instead, we found the oldest restaurant in Seville, a block from our hotel, called El Reconcillo, a dining establishment that began in 1670, a few decades after the death of Cervantes and which we assumed, perhaps like a character in his book, would give us a taste of the past. We were not disappointed.

Its status as a restaurant goes back a mere two hundred years, to the time when the Spanish state after the defeat of Napoleon began to expropriate church property (and the building had formerly been a convent). When you walk into the restaurant from the street, above the main door is a sign in wood, El Reconcillo, and then you enter. As you do, on the left is a very long dark wooden counter that starts in one room and turns into another. It functions as a bar and immediately above it, are rows of cured hams that hang from the ceiling. Towards the back entrance are two separated dining spaces with open doors.

The walls of the entire restaurant are covered in Moorish tiles whose designs change every three or for feet, clashing with the one before, contrasting with the one that comes after, but providing a pleasant visual pattern which despite the drinking, the noise and the bustle of the people eating and talking is surprisingly reassuring. We had our wine standing up and ordered some sliced ham and cheese as a starter. Soon after, a table opened up and like famous bullfighters, we were ushered into a private room with three tables.

A couple of couples occupied the ones beside us, the noise was drastically reduced and our somewhat theatrical waiter took our orders. I ate a leg of lamb, roast potatoes, shared bread and a plate of olives and had some more wine. My friends tried different dishes. The prices were reasonable, the waiter was proud of what he did, our neighours in this somewhat exclusive private room were gracious and by the time we left (rather late in the evening as we came there at ten) I managed to drag myself to our hotel, climbed the stairs, said goodnight to the Michelangelo statue and fell asleep. I realized the truth of one of Sancho Panzo’s sayings that, “A tooth is much more to be prized than a diamond.”

La Juderia

The only part of the Synagogue that can be seen in what is now a church-Santa Maria La Blanca.

I remember walking through the streets of Rabat in the early 1970s. The old Jewish quarter or the Mellah, no longer housed Jews. But their recent departure was signified by faded signs in Hebrew on the walls of the commercial area, signs of Mezuzot on the doors and local knowledge of where the old synagogues had been. Nothing like that exists in Seville.

There the Juderia exists in name only and one has to go to the newly established Jewish museum of Seville, to learn where the old synagogues were and where the Jews of pre-1492 Spain lived, prayed, worked, loved and died. One of these places is now a church called Santa Maria La Blanca, to be distinguished from a more famous church by the same name in Toledo, that was also once a synagogue before 1492.

It was a short cab ride to the church. We got off at the corner of a one-way street and walked towards the church entrance. It was a cold sunny winter morning in Seville. Stores were open, children were on their way to school, men and women of different ages were moving here and there and the kiosks were full of a variety of newspapers and magazines catering to every class and taste in contemporary Spain. In one kiosk a busy middle-aged woman seemed to be checking her accounts waiting for her morning customers. I counted at least fifteen different newspapers and magazines.

The church was open and we walked in. Just outside the door it had various postings for church activities and times for mass and confession written in Spanish. When you enter the church there is an aisle down the centre separated by two rows of pillars that support small Renaissance like arches but in that somewhat pre Baroque or perhaps Baroque styles, which seems to permeate Spanish religious architecture. The place was quiet and there were a few worshippers in the stalls, some sitting and some kneeling. A young man was organizing the altar and I assumed that he was the priest who was to soon say Mass.

There was no sign, inside or outside of the church that this building had once been a Synagogue, that the five books of Moses in Hebrew had been stored near

where the altar of the Church is now located. There was no sign of the ritual calendar, no evidence of previous ritual or communal activity. None of the ritual cups or textiles has survived. Perhaps they were taken to Portugal or North Africa by the traumatically expelled refugees and kept in new communal and personal spaces. Only the building remained, which by and in itself created a quiet, meditative space supported by recording of Renaissance Spanish religious music emerging from speakers somewhere in the which gave the church a period piece feeling as if in a film.

From 1492 until the present day the church would have had at least one copy of the Bible in the church. But that would have been for the exclusive use of the clergy as the Catholic Church and the Spanish church discouraged its members from reading the Bible. And so what was once the possession of all worshippers in that building had been reduced to one.

The sun shone in from windows above the pillars and towards the top right of the church as you looked up, revealed Moorish brickwork in an arch form that had not been plastered over, and which contrasted dramatically with the rest of the unity of the Church design. That was the only remaining part of the medieval synagogue that remained accessible to the eye.

To me, it became a symbol of the thousands of Jews who had been forced to convert and who managed to maintain some of the beliefs and rituals of Judaism, secret from their neighbours and the inquisition, until a time that they could (and many did) escape Spain and rejoin the Jewish community, or until the time the Inquisition knocked on their doors and began the terrifying process of interrogation, judgment and death by burning at the stake for either looking like, or acting like “Judaizers.” The Inquisition also burnt books, especially the Talmud, in its later years as it spread across Europe.

The philosopher Baruch Spinoza was a descendant of one of these refugees from Spain. More and more scholars believe that he was the first secularist, and so for those Spaniards who since the Napoleonic conquest have distanced themselves from the church and struggled to erect a liberal democracy within what was once a religious theocratic state and empire, he was and remains their liberator.

Without Spinoza there would be no free Spanish press or publishing, for the inquisition is no more, a victim of secular Spain. Most of the Spaniards who

read the scores of newspapers in the kiosks on the road near the church are completely unaware of this, and ironically so, as so many of these newspapers call for the destruction of the State of Israel.

A Sevillean vendor of Spinoza's legacy to modern Spain

It would appear that the Spaniards, having defeated the Moors and expelled the Jews would like the descendants of the Moors in the land of Israel to expel the Jews there, creating an endless round of Jewish exile. It is not surprising then that so few Israeli Jews of Sephardic descent have taken Spain seriously, when it recently offered to give all authentic and surviving descendants of expelled Jews, the joys and sorrows of modern citizenship in Spain. Supercessionism of the medieval Spanish sort is still quite alive, but in a new secular and political form.

From Synagogue to Cathedral

We went to the cathedral of Seville. It is said that Christopher Columbus is buried here, but he is also buried in Central America and two countries vie for the tourist income that can be measured against the reality of the tomb. As I stared at the immense amount of South American gold that adorned so many of the chapels of this enormous cathedral, I thought about the conquest of Mexico and Peru for it was from this land that Spaniards like Cortez and Pizarro, went out to subdue the emperors of the Aztecs and the Incas. And every monument I saw or visited until the end of the day was permeated by this thought.

The Road to Granada

View of the Albaicin, the old city of Granada from the Alhambra

We left Seville by car. An underemployed friend of the receptionist rented us his car and drove the three of us east, as we took a leisurely afternoon drive out of Seville through the rolling hills of Andalusia. On either side of the road were miles of olive groves, punctuated by white washed villages, houses all a cluster. Very few building were to be seen on the farms, just occasionally a house or working building in the midst of a grove, and one must assume that people live in the town and in the past, walked or took their donkeys to their

farm plots. Every once in a while we passed an olive oil processing plant and we could smell the oil in the air. I imagined that we were driving through a very thin but palpable olive oil cloud that was invisible, but permeated the road and the countryside.

Our driver had a CD of the great Roma/Gypsy guitarist and singer Camaron, from before the time he became famous and so, for the rest of the trip, each village then gained its own soundtrack, here a Fandango, there a Rumba, over there a mournful Peteneras and one could only guess at the lyrics, as we became absorbed by the landscape. In this near perfect Andalusian post card that we were driving through, I thought about of the passions that drive the people of this part of Spain in the following lyric that Camaron later made famous in the song called, "*Como el Agua*". Here is the Spanish

Si tus ojillos fueran
aceitunitas verdes,
toa la noche estaria
muele que
muele, muele que
muele,
toa la noche estaria
muele que
muele, muele
que
muele, muele
que muele.

Ay, como el agua.
Como el agua.
Como el agua.

And this is what it means:

If your eyes were
Green olive,
All night long, I would be
Crushing
Crushing, crushing,

Crushing
All night long, I would be
Crushing
Crushing, crushing,
Crushing, crushing
Crushing

Oh, like water.
Like water.
Like water.

As the sun began to set we, approached the rising hills of Granada in which the city is perched. Above the hills were the snow covered mountains of the Sierra Nevada, a place where in the past, outsiders, bandits and dissidents hid from central authority, a place that so many musicologists assume is the birthplace of Flamenco, among Jews, Christians, Muslims and Gypsies hiding from the authorities. It may be true. I liked the theory as a twenty something student of ethnomusicology. It allowed me to personally connect my own past with that of Flamenco, but at this age and stage in life, it is just another story, a good one, a rich one, but one that is hard to prove.

The city was spread across the hills and the lights of its buildings made it look as if a number of chandeliers had been spread across the landscape. As we drove up to our rather average looking hotel, I said to the driver in my broken Spanish, “The music of Camaron is as different as the singing of Julio Iglesias is from day and night, no?” Our driver laughed, told me that I had got it right and, after taking in our bags, turned his car in the direction to Seville. He had no intention of staying in Granada that night. He was from Seville, and clearly preferred the warm weather there from the winter alpine temperatures that seemed to grip Granada that night. We got settled in our hotel and then went out for dinner.

The next morning was cold with some clouds and some sun, but the cold of the mountains moved from the pavement into our feet and we could never quite shake it. We had rights to a cup of coffee and a croissant at the café next door, and as I took my drink I noticed a group of young adults in their early twenties and thirties with Flamenco shoes draped over their shoulders and whose posture was that of dancers, all speaking to each other in an animated fashion. Clearly

Flamenco here is a living art.

We had made an arrangement to be met by a bus to take us to the Alhambra. We were deposited not far from the entrance in a café that must have been owned by the tour company, where we sat for about an hour waiting for our tour to start. Somehow, we did not pass the entrance to the gardens and monuments until another hour had passed. I noticed that either the Spaniards had not quite grasped that tourists did not have the same approach to time or, it was just disorganized. I favor the first theory.

In the Gardens of the Alhambra

Courtyard of the Lions, Alhambra

We passed the entrance and we were given headphones, which barely worked. Our tour guide was a well-preserved, middle-aged Spanish woman who spoke English reasonably well. She was filled with facts about the buildings, about the gardens, the Moors who first built the palace, the Spaniards who came afterward, including an occupation by Napoleon’s troops who laid waste to part of the complex. But she somehow could not put anything into a meaningful context. She was what the medievals would have called a chronicler, but not a historian.

The Alhambra is an enormous complex, replete with gardens, squares, tourist shops and a cafeteria or two. It seems to have hundreds of employees. There is constant gardening going on and clean up details, and men and women manning internal ticket turnstiles. At one point, there is a Renaissance style European palace and once you have passed all these lesser sites, you finally are allowed to enter the Moorish gardens and reception room of the Sultan with its enclosed courtyard, pool, Garden of the Lions and fountains and then finally, into the court where the Sultans once received their visitors.

When I lived in Morocco in 1976 I visited palaces, mosques and koranic schools from times just after the expulsion of the Moors and Jews. In Morocco, there are still artisans who know how to make a palace, construct the tiles and do the stucco designs of Arabic script. As I turned a corner I spotted a young Spanish conservator carefully repairing a part of the wall. She looked more like a pharmacist or medical assistant than an artisan. What is still common in Morocco is now unusual here.

Shortly after the Spanish conquest the Alhambra was largely left to ruin. In the 19th century it drew the attention of the American writer Washington Irving, who lived in its ruins and conjured up the past with his writings, especially in *Tales from the Alhambra*.

In the 1950s, before tourists rediscovered Spain, the government would allow cheap Grade B films to use it for its sets. I remember watching with fascination how the courtyard of the lions and the reception hall of the last Sultans featured in the film, *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*, produced by Charles H. Schneer. I saw the film as a child and could never forget the Moorish splendor of the place. Soon I was to be standing in it.

We had to wait in line for about forty minutes before we were allowed in. I suspect that during the high season, from May to October, the wait would be much longer. There is no mention of this Grade B film in any of the literature that they gave us.

The Alhambra is a gorgeous Moorish fortress with high defensive walls, a palace, a pleasure garden and then, for centuries it was a deserted and despised reminder to the reconquering Spaniards of their former religious and political domination by the heretic infidel. But then, during the late 19th century, Spain rediscovered its history and if the historians can now be trusted, the pre-conquest period of Spain was one of "convivencia" a time when Moslems Jews and Christians lived in cultural harmony.

What was once despised has become, in contemporary Spanish eyes a medieval paradise. Having tired of hearing how from my guide how wonderful the Sultans of Granada once were, I realized that in true Spanish style she was unwittingly telling us a tall tale. She was totally unaware of it, but Cervantes makes fun of this kind of thing when Don Quixote gives the following speech:

> *Happy the age, happy the time, to which the ancients gave the name of golden, not because in that fortunate age the gold so coveted in this our iron one was gained without toil, but because they that lived in it knew not the two words "mine" and "thine"…Then all was peace, all friendship, all concord; as yet the dull share of the crooked plough had not dared to rend and pierce the tender bowels of our first mother that without*

compulsion yielded from every portion of her broad fertile bosom all that could satisfy, sustain, and delight the children that then possessed her.

That night we went to the caves of Sacramonte to hear and see Flamenco. It went on for no more than an hour and as I went to use the men's, I passed by the young dancers and singers who were practicing their movements in front of each other, while the female dancers made sure their make up and costumes were "letter perfect." They all sang, played and danced well. There was a guitarist, a singer, two dancers and three others who clapped polyrhythms, what Flamencos call "*Palmas*." Each style of Flamenco is called a "palo" with names like *Bulerias*, *Sevillanas* or the old *Cante Hondo* which is sung in free rhythm to the banging of a cane on the ground.

Each of the distinct *Palos* are played to rhythms with cycles of accents, sometimes three, sometimes six and sometimes spread across a twelve beat cycle with specific, counter-intuitive accents. If an audience member knows what the accents are, he or she is welcomed to clap along, following the pattern. This makes him or her an expert, what Flamencos call an aficionado. Inevitably, tourists often think that they are just clapping alongside the music and often accent the wrong beats. However, most people who hear Flamenco for the first time and start clapping instinctively, realize that after a few repetitions, they are out of synch and stop clapping, allowing those who really know to carry on. This night was no different.

The Moors have returned to Andalus and in large numbers. Legally and illegally, Arabic speaking North African Muslims coming to Spain to make temporary or permanent homes number in the millions and more are coming. The old quarter of Granada which we looked down upon from the ramparts of the old palace, is receiving immigrants from North Africa whose every intention is to reoccupy Andalus, a place that they hope one day to reclaim for themselves.

Our charming tour guide was not thinking about this, and she never mentioned it, when during the tour we heard the Islamic call to prayer echo from a recently established mosque, just across the valley. If the Spaniards think that the Alhambra is simply a beautiful Moorish ruin that they have restored, they have another thing coming. It is all of that and symbol of something else as well.

In Search of the Most Excellent Guitar

(A much shorter version of this section was published in the *Brooklyn Rail* for their summer 2015 edition.)

> *When eleven o'clock came, Don Quixote found a guitar in his chamber; he tried it, opened the window, and perceived that some persons were walking in the garden; and having passed his fingers over the frets of the guitar and tuned it as well as he could, he spat and cleared his chest, and then with a voice a little hoarse but full-toned, he sang the following ballad, which he had himself that day composed…*

For years I had heard that Cordoba is a city filled with master guitar makers and players. And here I was on a sunny winter morning, standing in the Plaza del Potro, soaking in the winter sun, in the potter's plaza in old Cordoba, a place described by Cervantes in his novel about Don Quixote and who Cervantes makes both a guitarist and singer of ballads. As I am also a guitarist and singer of ballads, I hoped that day to find a most excellent guitar.

I walked from my hotel to the Plaza and gazed upon a cobble stone square that led to the municipal art museum and which shared a courtyard, filled with fragrant orange trees, with the family museum of Julia Romero de Torres, a 20th century Cordoban painter who has left us with canvases of some of the greatest singers of his time such as Pastora Pavon, also known as *La Nina de Los Peines*.

From there, I entered a nearby two story house with a courtyard dedicated to interactive exhibits about the history and practice of Flamenco and above all, to the remarkable career of the Andalucían singer and guitarist, Fosforito. I sat entranced, watching a long video where he gives a sincere oral history of his life; the poor son of a village based Flamenco singer, who in 1956 won four awards at the Cordoba Flamenco festival and which launched a dazzling career that has yet to end.

I went to the man at the entrance and in simple Spanish asked, if he could give me directions on my map of the city in order to find a guitar maker's studio or "*guitareria*," reminding me of the word Pizzeria, although I doubted that they created guitars here with the speed of a restaurant.

He looked at me and said, "No!" Then he smiled, got up, went with me to the entrance of the museum that looks on to the plaza, and pointed to a wall a mere

one hundred feet towards the start of the plaza. “There” he said.” There is the *guitareria*.”

I walked down the edge of the square, looked at the wall, turned the corner of the building and there it was. A door, that opened on to a workshop that could barely hold two people and that was as narrow as a subway car. In the back, lay a glass case filled with finished guitars and from the ceiling, hung guitars in various stages of construction.

A youngish looking man in his forties was working on a guitar and I greeted him as he put it down in order to say hello. Soon after, I found that he had lived in London for a number of years and so we quickly moved to English for my convenience. I explained to him that I was a guitarist and music journalist. I asked if I could play one of his guitars.

I took off my coat and arranged the chairs so that nothing could touch or scratch the instrument. I played a very simple Flamenco piece called Peteneras, and then tuned the bass e string down to d. I then played my version of the 18th century blind Irish harpist O‘Carolan’s piece called “Big Fairy, Little Fairy” and then I stopped.

The guitar made me sound ten times better than I could imagine and I let the sensation sink in. I asked him the cost of the guitar. It was not cheap, but it was worth it, as I have yet to hear anything like it. I vowed that I would start saving money now and one day return to buy it. My quest for an excellent guitar had been successful. But, I was sure that the quest to make such a guitar must have been long and hard and perhaps, I thought, it may not be over.

After chatting about Spain and the ongoing financial and employment crisis, I asked him what is his name, “Jaime Peña Aragon” he said. “Peña, Peña, Peña” I said. “Why is that name so familiar, and why is it especially familiar when I am looking at your guitars?” He then told me, “ My uncle is Paco Peña, the famous Flamenco guitarist! Do you know who he is?” I answered, “Do I know who Jimi Hendrix was? Do I know who Eric Clapton is?” I then asked this maestro of the Peña family to tell me his story.

Jaime Peña Aragon, in his studio

Jaime Peña Aragon was born on February 14, 1974. On both sides of his family he has deep roots in Andalucía. His parents were born in Cordoba in the 1940s. On his mother's side he traces his family back to Cabra, a village about a half hour's drive from Cordoba. He knows little about and has had little contact with his father's side of the family but, he knows that they came from the village of Montoro in Cordoba province.

He is the youngest of three siblings. His eldest sister Silvia is the mother of a young, upcoming Flamenco guitarist named David Leiva, whom he assures me will soon be famous. His elder brother Carlos, has been his partner in the design and making of a wide range of musical instruments over the past two decades, including guitars.

Jaime comes from a large, extended Andalucían family. His maternal grandmother gave birth to nine children, including his uncle Paco Peña, the world famous guitarist. But growing up was not easy in Jaime's family. His mother and father fought and argued constantly, leading to divorce and then he and his siblings experienced various conflicts with his mother, a woman of shifting moods and prone to conflict.

But that was offset by the closeness Jaime experienced with his mother's extended family. He tells me that his grandmother Rosario, managed to raise her nine children despite the fact that she could neither read nor write. Her husband, Antonio, was a clever hustler, who travelled widely and always managed to make money in times of turmoil, such as during and after the Spanish Civil war. But he was rarely around. He would come home, make her pregnant and continue his rambling. Jaime never met him and admits that these stories come through the women in his family.

It is hard to know what was really going on then. Andalucians were generally uneducated, persecuted by land owners and torn apart by the Spanish Civil War. When we read about these things in the abstract, they are part of the great tragedy that lead up to WWII, but for Spaniards, the suffering and destruction has a knock on affect across the generations, as they never experienced an allied liberation from fascism as the Italians did. Franco simply died in 1975, a year after Jaime was born, when the rest of Europe was happily living in the late 20th century.

“I am told that my uncle Antonio was similar in temperament to my grandfather, but he was more stable than Antonio the elder, and had a unique creative temperament.” Jaime tells me that it was he that made his younger brother Paco his first guitar. “He really had no idea what he was doing, but was motivated by the fact that his younger brother was showing precocious talent as a Flamenco guitarist.”

Jaime and his siblings grew up in a simple Andalucían house, two rooms slept in by many, sharing a bath room and toilet with neighbouring families, opening onto an internal courtyard where people would sit, talk, eat and socialize. It was here that Jaime remembers listening to his uncle Paco play the guitar while his aunts sang Christmas Carols, Sevillanas and Fandangos, “and laughed so much that they managed to forget their hunger.”

But Jaime’s childhood in Cordoba was cut short at a very young age. There was little work in the south of Spain during the 1960s and so hundreds of thousands of Andalucians went to the north of the country, where factories were full and jobs were plentiful. His family moved to Barcelona where he went to kindergarten and elementary school but then, his parents divorced. He returned to Cordoba with his mother.

Jaime and his brother Carlos managed to study at a school run by the Salesian fathers. The divorce added to the poverty of his immediate family but, he managed to persuade his mother to let him finish high school and then did his compulsory military service.

When this was over, “I entered the world of wood. I got a job in an antiques restoration shop as a wood carver in training. In the morning I worked at wood. In the afternoon I made up for some missed courses in high school and at night, I took courses in order to get in to college. I did this for a few years, without any feeling of mastery. I then took the opportunity to move to London England, for two years working on restoring antiques.”

At the same time, Jaime’s elder brother Carlos and a close mutual friend, Manuel Parrado, had also been exploring the world of wood. Together, they decided to set up a studio to make musical instruments. One would think that they would have focused on Flamenco guitars but that is not what happened.

By their mid twenties Jaime, Carlos and Manuel had been smitten by the Celtic

music revival. Carlos brought his interest in instrument construction along with his former study of the classical oboe. And so they set off to make Celtic instruments and other instruments used in the growing Early Music revival. They also began performing Celtic music in an informal ensemble, without any intention of going professional.

They set up their studio in Cordoba and managed to construct a version of the traditional Irish bagpipe, which sold very well. They attracted some very high-end clients and they got to know the piper, Paddy Maloney of Chieftains fame. With some help from other Spanish clients, the brothers and their friend decided to head for the capital city, Madrid and set up their shop nearby. As Andalucians who had moved to central Spain making Celtic instruments and playing the music on the side Jaime admits that he felt like, “a Martian on Venus.”

As bank loans and taxes were a huge factor in getting the money to start their factory, they got serious funding just before the New Year and somehow, whatever it is that they bought for the atelier, it all worked out. At the time it was all done in a total panic, but in retrospect, Jaime tells me that when you think about doing something for years, and you check out all aspects of it, practically and theoretically, you may actually pull it off, and pull it off they did.

In the village of Guadarrama near Madrid they manufactured Asturian and Galician bagpipes (it is not widely know that northern Spain has an ancient tradition of bagpipe playing, one that I first heard on Alan Lomax’s Spanish recordings as an undergraduate in ethnomusicology in the early seventies). They also constructed Baroque oboes, Baroque traverse flutes, Irish bagpipes, whistles in different keys and then, inevitably, they started to experiment making guitars.

It was actually their uncle Paco who encouraged them to do so. It was obvious to him as Jaime says that, “We had been raised with the sound of the guitar during our childhood and younger years. You could say that the guitar runs through our veins and blood. But our first guitars were experiments, and we did not make them to sell.”

Jaime, Carlos and Manuel were doing just fine near Madrid. Like many Andalucians in the music business, Madrid is the “New York” of Spain and they had arrived. They felt they had much more to go until they would be recognized as the master

craftsmen that they were becoming. In his optimism, Jaime apprenticed himself to the well-known sculptor Roberto Reula and managed to sell some of his pieces in Madrid. “It became clear to me that I was not an artistic lightweight. I even managed to modify some of my pieces and sell them as high end beer taps to some very upscale restaurants.”

All of that post Franco European optimism that was so much part of the nineties collapsed during the latest Spanish economic implosion. All of a sudden, orders dried up, credit was tight and they had to shrink their nascent factory. It was a traumatic blow to all three of them. Like so many other Spaniards who had become entrepreneurs in the new European economy, they had trusted the system and the system had let them down. Manuel and Carlos stayed near Madrid and downsized their workshop. Their European dream was over. Jaime moved back to Cordoba vowing to make guitars, only guitars.

When Jaime began to focus on making guitars after his return to Cordoba, one of the great Flamenco centres of the south, he began to take a renewed interest in Flamenco as an art form. He tells me that it was a return to something from his childhood. He recalls that all aspects of the music were part of his upbringing, like the air he breathed.

He remembers that when his extended family would get together for Christmas, these gatherings were major musical events. “We would often sing the Christmas Carols of Ramon Medeina and many other traditional Flamenco pieces. My uncle Paco would accompany us and then we would all go of to the Grand Mosque/ Cathedral and celebrate midnight mass. By the way, these extended family gatherings often number over sixty people. We still do them.”

Jaime was not left to his own devices as he began to establish his own “guitareria” in Cordoba, a city that is the home of some of Spain’s most famous guitar makers such as Manual Reyes. But he has a great mentor in his uncle Paco. “Along with my wood carving mentors, such as Pedro Sanchez and (my first teacher) Aurelio Sanchez, Paco’s understanding of the guitar is vast and complex. He will talk to me about a guitar’s sound, comparing it to kinds of bells, or some other sonic phenomena. He also knows that guitars can be made with a different basic volume, and this depends as much and how the guitarist wants to use it, as the nature of the instrument. At the end of the day, I listen to him but, I have to take into account the needs of my clients because,

simply put, I have to sell guitars!”

The longer Jaime has stayed in Cordoba the more he experienced the Flamenco world. He has told me that Flamenco is a wide and deep musical world and that you can die without knowing, or having experienced all aspects of it. He feels that he is a fairly competent “aficionado,” that is the Spanish word for a connoisseur of Flamenco and, he sits of the board of an association for the promotion of Flamenco that his uncle Paco has established.

The association promotes large concerts as well as intimate Flamenco gatherings called “juergas” and a contest for young singers, dancers and guitarists, for in the past it has often been through public contests where new stars like Fosforito emerged as nascent stars in the Flamenco firmament. Jaime feels that his added value as a guitar maker is that he also plays and lives in the musical environment where this remarkable art form began and continues to thrive.

Many guitar makers are unable to articulate the process by which they create a guitar, but Jaime has given it much thought. He tells me, “I make guitars like a collage artist. I start making the different parts independently, and then pay special attention to the construction of the soundboard for each and every instrument. Oddly enough, sometimes I spend more time on one part and sometimes on another. It is hard to predict. I am not always happy with the result because I am always experimenting and doing something new to each and every guitar. I feel that there are times when I am taking two steps forward and one step back, but that is the only path to greatness. I share my results with my brother Carlo. He is an expert, very intuitive and gives good advice.”

Jaime feels that despite all of this diversity, his guitars have a distinctive sound. They reflect his workshop. Every once in a while he is surprised that he has made an instrument that has an extraordinary sound. He laments that it is often impossible to know just why, but he keeps on striving for excellence.

From a guitar player’s point of view he does not see the Spanish and the Flamenco guitar as opposed types, although I have guitar playing friends in the north of Spain who tell me that the Spanish classical guitar is a northern phenomena, related to the musical traditions of Barcelona and Catalonia, whereas the Flamenco guitar is an expression of Andalucía.

Jaime explains that the classic guitar is known for its “round and perfect

sound.”

But Jaime sees himself as a bit of a rebel. Yes, he is making Flamenco guitars, but guitars that share something with the more classical version. On one occasion Jaime gave his brother Carlos one of his finished pieces to play. Carlos told him it was a classic. Paco was there at the time and this made him laugh. He told the two of him that in his opinion a good guitar, is a good guitar!

Jaime tells me that he learns more about guitars and their nature from each and every one of his clients, but he points out that even a good guitarist can make a bad guitar sound good. I agree with him , but I would add that although a bad guitarist can sound good on a good guitar, a good guitarist usually sounds better.

He believes that the world of music is evolving and so is the related world of guitar construction. For example, he explains that in general, Flamenco guitars have lower bridges than do classical guitars. And so the strings are closer to the sound hole and the fret board. At the same time, each musician brings his or her own playing style to the guitar, and this in itself has an effect on the ergonomics of the instrument. This is not made any easier by the fact that really good guitarists speak very abstractly about the sound of a guitar, how it feels and what it means for them. Jaime has to turn those words into wood.

He tells me, “When we were working on the wind instrument factory it was a complete obsession. And, when it did not work out for me I took it very personally. That transition to guitars here in Cordoba was hard and stressful, but, there is much emotional, familial and historical justice in what I am doing now…I am an Andalucían with deep roots here and with the music called Flamenco. This chapter of my life has not yet closed. Paco, Carlos and myself have many projects that we want to do. Because of the economic downturn, we cannot do all of them but, we hope to do them all one day. I want to enlarge the workshop, work with others and make guitars in what I consider to be this most beautiful of cities, Cordoba.”

As I left Jaime’s studio, I walked across the Plaza del Potro, towards the Guadalquivir River and back to my hotel. Thinking of Jaime’s struggle to make a most excellent guitar, I recalled the words of the Spanish poet, Garcia Lorca

who once wrote,

> *The artist, and particularly the poet, is always an anarchist in the best sense of the word. He must heed only the call that arises within him from three strong voices: the voice of death, with all its foreboding, the voice of love and the voice of art.*

Jaime Peña Aragon has listened to all of these voices. You can hear them in his guitars.

Leaving Cordoba

Statue of Medieval Jewish Rabbi and Philosopher, Maimonedes, a native of Cordoba

I spent the last day of my trip in Cordoba, wandering through the Mosque Cathedral, noting the signs for those priests and nuns who were killed by the Republicans and commemorated on plaques, at various shrines within this grand building.

I visited the statue of Maimonedes and saw high school kids getting a speech about the Jews of Medieval Spain and convivencia from their teacher, while they all tried to touch the foot of the statue. When I asked one of the kids why they do this, he answered, “For Good Luck.”

So even when a Jewish philosopher is honored by his city of birth, his statue is treated like a Catholic Saint, no different than the one that would be carried through the streets of Seville during upcoming holy week, and whose supporters I first saw in the Plaza of the Americas when I arrived.

Then, visiting the archaeological museum I wandered among Roman antiquities and exquisitely carved Arabic and Hebrew tombstones, from the time that these two communities actually lived side by side in Cordoba, people of flesh and blood with hopes and dreams, just like me.

I packed my bags and took the fast train to Madrid and the airport. As I watched the sun go down among the olive groves and over the bleached white farm houses that we passed, I remembered a poem, written by Rabbi Moses ben Jacob ibn Ezra who lived in Spain from 1055-60.

I behold graves of ancient time, of days long past,

Wherein a people sleeps the eternal sleep.

There is no enmity among these folk—no envy;

No loving of neighbor and no hating;

And my thought, envisioning them, cannot discern

Master from slave!

Excavated Medieval Synagogue, Cordoba

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