

## FLAMENCO, IT BEGINS WITH COMPÁS (THE RHYTHM) An Art Form Travelogue

by Rita Cummings

If I only had a few minutes to describe *flamenco* music and dancing, I'd approach it from the following three aspects:



1) To start with, *flamenco* is unique because it is predominately interactive; the performers move onto the stage platform in a quiet wave motion, then someone begins *compás* by clapping, one hand cupped before it taps the other - making a muted marked sound. A soloist, the *flamenco* dancer, takes a position to lead the dialogue between the guitarist, singer, and percussion, that is, the rest of us on and off stage. Using footwork to give rhythmic signals, stances and moves; the dancer can charge the atmosphere, and set the tone, pace, and the intensity of the mood. By bringing forth expression from deep within his or her own center, the dancer expresses the serious side and the lighthearted side of life. All this to the backdrop of *compás*, the rhythm.

Each person, like the poet, hears and feels their own rhythm. You won't see the exact same presentation twice! Like jazz and blues, the performers collaborate in real-time, and they express the sentiments of authentic *flamenco* melodies. A soloist dominates and can stand alone. The *flamenco* artist can use the body as both movement and percussion. The result gives us a trip back though the ages.

2) Secondly, using a map of the world, I'd start in the Sub-

continent of India, where almost five centuries ago, the Gypsies were forced out by invaders and considered outcasts. They began their migration and brought along with them the authentic songs we hear today and their way of telling a story in a dance. Although some groups traveled by sea to places like Africa, Greece, and Japan, I'd concentrate on their overland journey to the North and West, through the Middle East; stopping in Southern Spain, the area called Andalucía, where the culture nurtured *flamenco*.



I believe because of my own life experience, that most art forms, especially music and dance, come from a celebration of life for its good times and its struggles. Even today, people with a simpler standard of living, all over the world, will gather around the fire at night, in community to pass the time, to harmonize their voices with the rhythm-makers, to express some frustration or happiness by singing, dancing, strumming, or merely keeping the beat (*compás*). Travelers in the 16th century were no different.

If we travel the route again and review the influences the travelers exchanged, we'd realize that hand and finger positions and movements learned in India were based on the lotus flower and called "mudras" and in Spanish "*filigranas*." They were used to tell epic stories and convey deep emotions while an individual was dancing. Barefooted East Indian dance is most like old *flamenco*, with its turnout, carriage, laterality of line, and skyward posturing of the upper body. The dancer uses undulations to emphasize the force of Mother Earth.

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In the Middle East, especially Persia, the Gypsies learn a looser dance style that focuses on the solar plexus and the abdominal. They also adopt a modified stance with hip thrusts and leaning backward. The dancer's jewelry marked compás.

Shawls and fans show up on costumes in France and Italy, an import from the Orient. In Spain, castanets replace percussion jewelry. In the Iberian peninsula, we can think of the Spanish fan as representative of the superficial overtones of the culture at that time which demanded keeping a cool mysterious demeanor; being mindful of social station; and above all, exaggerate and exploit sexuality to stay seductive. A more artistic and sophisticated form of dancing was demanded in which shawls and fans were utilized as an extension of garment and movement.



...costume adapted for Japanese fusion

The culture in Andalucía was more extroverted and gay. The climate and diet of the Mediterranean contributed to the mood. Italian influenced singers embraced the *flamenco* song, and performed them coming forth with its power yet contrasting that with sweetness of honey. Performers became more vivacious and upbeat. Colorful fabrics and polka dots were worn to reflect the lighter moods and to contrast the

dark moods of suffering and remembering, purging the emotions (catharsis), and forgetting poverty and injustice. All to a backdrop of *compás*.



Returning to the map, we visit Latin America, especially Columbia and Cuba, from where the Spaniards brought home songs and rhythms that influenced the flamenco form.

The Gypsies, like all nomadic peoples, carried with them ways to remember their history. Because they did not always have access to their instruments, they developed popping sounds, tongue clicking, and knuckle rapping for *compás*.



**3) Lastly, I would focus just on the dancer.** Imagine a tree with roots that reach down well into the

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earth. The legs of the flamenco dancer are these roots. Once anchored they resonate a pulse; they are the rhythm-keepers. The dancer's torso, like the tree trunk, appears cylindrical with a tough armor, solid, and unbending, supported by the anchors. The dancer's arms, as the tree branches, are the spirit-keepers. They articulate line and lift and can reach up to the sun and moon, droop a little, sway, stretch out, or reach out laterally. Pay attention now to the hands. You can shine a light on them and produce a silhouette finding that the dancer's hand and finger movements, (filigranas), are putting on a dance all their own.



The dancer makes a serious facial expression showing us intense concentration. Often there are wrinkles in the forehead, eyebrows curled up in a frown, jaw and cheeks seem tight; lips held pursed, closed or slightly open- never singing.

*Flamenco* melodies describe the extremes of the human condition. For example, hardships that a person suffers when there is a struggle for survival of spirit; pain and frustration due to repression; aching and pleadings; and, of course,

lightheartedness and joy. The following are *flamenco* song titles.

*There Is a Door to My Soul*

*The Song I Like the Most*

*They'll Come to Grief*

*What Made You Do That?*

*Where I Went to Drink*

*I'll be Sentenced to Death*

The *flamenco* dancer may appear introverted to us because we have the impression that the dancer is occupied with an internal dialogue. The keepers communicate with each other, rhythm to spirit, via vibrations traveling the conduits in the trunk of the tree. While the rhythm is survival, the spirit aspires to a more idealistic atmosphere as a way of being and feeling.

To perform or appreciate any dance that comes from a tradition, it is essential to understand the life circumstances, feelings, and motives of the people who established and passed it on. I believe that we can benefit from, as well as enjoy the legacy left to us by people of all ethnic groups. Imagine worn out coal miners gathering around the fire after the evening meal step-dancing to a back drop of *compás*. Picture Hawaiians wrapped in tropical flowers, celebrating by dancing to strumming and song. Remember that cowboys out on the range, sing and play songs around the campfire. They begin with *compás*.

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