

A Flamenco Journey

Canada Council Arts Grant Trip Report

by Susana "La Ceniza"

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When I received official word that I had been awarded the study grant, my husband Chuck (Carlos) and I were performing regularly at a hotel in Old Montreal, and had been hired to continue throughout the summer. We were also in the middle of our Flamenco guitar and dance course for Concordia University; therefore, we made plans to depart for Spain in the early fall of 1975.

Our intention was to be exposed to as much of the Flamenco dance as possible, both of the stage variety, and (especially) the more authentic and spontaneous Gypsy folk version, if we could find it. Chuck had many friends among the Gitanos from his previous study trips to Morón de la Frontera, but we were not so sure of being able to meet the non-professional dancers he had heard of, as his emphasis had been previously on the guitar and the cante.

Another important goal was to bring back as much Super 8 film of each type of dancing as possible for reference for continued study, once back in isolation in Canada again. We were hoping that once in Spain we could extend our stay due to income from Chuck's correspondence school (The Academy of Flamenco Guitar). As it turned out, we were successful in all but our last plan, due to the Canadian mail strike.

Our first stop was Madrid, and we immediately contacted Mercedes and Albano Leon, with whom I had studied for two months, three years before. At that time I had the opportunity to meet one of Mercedes' best young students, who let me tape and film her entire repertoire. Those films and the intensive instruction I received from Chuck (and our record collection) were the only exposure I had to the art for three years, and it was with mixed emotion that we performed for them, that first week in Madrid.

Their reaction surprised us; after silently watching me dance through two or three routines, they flatly refused to give me any kind of lessons unless I promised to take daily for the next two years, at a rate of \$16 an hour. This was, of course, definitely out of the question; and of course, they had no alternatives to suggest. We left the studio a bit crestfallen, since we had hoped that they might help us get started in the professional world. We later realized that they probably had been shocked and offended in recognizing some of their own material, which they knew I hadn't learned directly from them.

Our next move was to rent regular practice studio time at "La Granja" in Amor de Dios street. (Actually, "La Granja" is the name of the pension just above the studios, but there is no sign except that outside). I began practicing there two hours a day, and at night we went out to Flamenco nightclubs (called "tablaos") in search of a good dancer, who I could approach for lessons, and hopefully for films for future study.

If you frequent the practice studio (below the pension La Granja), on the calle Amor de Dios long enough, you are likely to meet everyone who is involved in dancing in Spain, from the beginning foreigner on a package tour, to the big performing troupes that work the world circuit. This is where most of the hiring for Flamenco groups is done - auditions, rehearsals, and class lessons. There you will encounter the aspiring, starving artist, the "estrellas" (stars) of the day, the impresarios, and all sorts of parasites of the art; each an individual with their own facade or integrity - the best to the worst, with their own good and bad points.

Here I began taking general classes with Maria Magdalena, who has an excellent reputation as a teacher; and from my experience it is well founded. She holds her classes twice a day, for one hour each, five days a week. She charges \$8 a week for one class a day, or \$16 for both classes. They consist of instruction in no-nonsense techniques of Spanish dance; posture, arm exercises, footwork, turns, and castanets, plus the many asides about the art that can be picked up by an attentive student. She also gives private lessons at the going rate of \$8 a half-hour, which are only worthwhile if you want a specific "bails montado" (set routine) from her, and are prepared to cram fast during the class and practice long hours by yourself, to be ready for new material the next day. She wastes no time, but is careful of the level of the student and her rate of assimilation; in particular, she is quite honest and not at all afraid of losing students who do not accept her point of view, as she has more people waiting for lessons from her than there are hours in the day.

After three weeks of lessons with her, concentrating on technical correction, I began to have a much better idea of the areas in which I had to work. She told me that I had learned from Chuck everything that a dancer could possibly learn from a guitarist; and that at this point, unless I had a lot of time and money to spend, I could work on my own. I could, however, take an occasional private lesson with her if I felt I needed it, and she could fit me into her schedule. She felt in the main, however, that with the basic corrections she had given, the rest was up to me.

When Chuck mentioned that we wanted to travel south to Morón to meet his Gypsy friends in the art, she said, "They have nothing to teach you technically, but you have everything to learn from them about the art." She was certainly right; with the Gitanos I was to find little of the physical technique taught in the Madrid academies, but it took me no time to understand the meaning of the movements, and the strong importance of compas (Flamenco rhythm). With them I found nonprofessional dancing at the return to the source; the pure expression stripped of stylization and device. I began to realize that all I had seen of Flamenco before was an empty shell (except in some individual artists), stripped of its meaning, and dying away from its cradle as a folk art.

Before I describe the Morón part of my trip, I'd like to say something about the ambiente of Madrid. There is little of the Andaluz gracia about the place; it is a cosmopolitan city, and all that implies - pollution, expense, the rat race, hard-nosed plastic fronts struggling desperately to survive in a relentless environment.

We went to fourteen tablaos in Madrid, and were disappointed and disenchanted (not to say occasionally disgusted) by the low caliber of the entertainment. To begin with, many of the dancers are foreigners, which would not be bad; the problem is that the management hires them because they will perform for extremely low wages (which is understandable, as most of them are struggling for survival and are desperate for experience), thus forcing professional Spanish dancers out of the tablaos. In addition, many of the girls are chosen for their looks, rather than dancing ability - and finally management itself discourages artistic efforts, as their marketplace is largely the bourgeois and upper middle-class Spaniard and the foreign tourist.

A typical tablao consists of three sections; the program usually begins around eleven o'clock with a large "cuadro" (flamenco group) on stage; perhaps twelve dancers, three guitarists, and a couple of singers. It is almost impossible to hear the guitar due to the palmas (flamenco hand clapping), and so far apparently the clubs have not discovered a way to use microphones effectively. The girls themselves are usually extremely bored, and show it on stage. Each gets up and does a small dance (the show begins with a group Sevillanas), usually a Soleares or an Alegrias; finally the show ends with a group Fandangos, and the large cuadro leaves.

After a brief period, the "figuras" make their appearance in smaller combinations of artists; perhaps a guitarist, singer, and dancer - and this is where most of the pretension to art takes place. Finally (at about two in the morning) the large cuadro returns, and repeats the first show.

This is not to say that there were not some good moments. The tablao Café Chinitas had the best overall performance; the artists there made a real effort to be convincing, and most everything is done with good taste and intelligence. The "figura" there is the guitarist Victor Monge "Serranito"; he is impressive, but a bit too classical for my taste. None of the dancers stood out in particular, except for a middle-aged rondelette blonde woman who danced her Rumba with as much "gracia" (charm, typical of the Andaluz), as any Madrileña can hope to acquire. We also enjoyed very much Antonio "El Pelao", who really turned on for us when he noticed we were doing palmas to Bulerías correctly (the rest of the club was filled with Japanese tourists).

And finally I should mention Marcela Del Real (of whom more later), as being one of the most potentially fine dancers I have seen anywhere - she stood out like a live flower against a tapestry at La Pacheca.

However, I should mention that although the good artists do perform occasionally in the clubs in Madrid, it is very difficult to find out when and where they will be performing; even the management itself doesn't know who the artists are at any given time, and unless the publicize (which they only do with the superstars), all you can do is take your chances. At \$8 a person, that can get very expensive.

Of course, this can't help but affect the Flamencos and their approach to the art. The studio at Amor de Dios I remember as an extremely uptight sweatbox for all concerned; guitarists, singers, dancers, impresarios, and students. The surprising thing is the occasional breakthrough of a real humanity and helpfulness among these artists, considering the environment. The sight of professional competition, and the daily contact with it weeds out the weak natures fast; it either makes you or breaks you. It can inspire you to develop the technical skill and inner discipline so necessary to the professional artist, or it can turn you off when you discover the incredible amount of work required to compete for such heartbreaking and unrewarding performing situations as tablaos or tour groups. That is why it is so important to have an understanding of the true art; the contact with it in Madrid is so negative and destructive in general that it is impossible to imagine why anyone would want to spend his life in it. At this point, if it hadn't been for Chuck's strong inner conviction and his sense of beauty and truth about the art (from his experiences with the Gitanos), I would have been ready to drop out of Flamenco altogether.

As we left Madrid for Morón del la Frontera, I tried to dispel the bad taste I had of Flamenco in Madrid, and attempted to put myself in a mood to meet the Gypsies there with an open mind. And so we took the Talgo to Sevilla (the train was air conditioned, but it carried things a bit too far; we were lucky that we had our bulky sweaters close at hand. Spain is a land of contrasts, but....).

We arrived late at night, so had to spend it in a closet pretending to be a pension, near the train station in hot, muggy, polluted Sevilla. We were off early the next morning on the bus to Morón - out of the city on the new freeway. The Muzak on the bus alternated between Sevillanas, Johnny Mathis, and the current "rumba estrella" craze, Las Grecas, complete with electric guitar.

Finally we reached the crossroads, and the end of the smooth ride. We began heading deeper and deeper into the farm lands, passing through several picturesque small towns. I slowly became aware of the two country men sitting behind us on the bus. They actually knew all the verses to the piped-in Sevillanas, and encouraged each other with their personal jaleo; their language intonation highly melodic, almost music in its own right. That was my first encounter with Andalusian "gracia"; and as I looked around the bus, I became more and more conscious that the people were far more alive, more "alegre" (joyful) than the city people we had left behind.

(Here I'd like to shift to present tense, as it better describes our experiences.)

Morón De La Frontera

We finally get to Moron, entering through the cement factory road; and immediately on arrival take a room in the only pension (boardinghouse) in town, the Fonda Pascual. We take the room in the old part; a new part has been added since Chuck was here last - the fonda is aspiring to be a Holiday Inn. There is no water in the shower, but the landlady tells us not to fret; that there will probably some tomorrow between 9 and 11 A. M. when the city turns on the power again. Apparently there is always a shortage this time of year. So we try to improve the state of our ripe, traveled bodies as best we can, using water from the drinking jug.

That afternoon, Chuck takes me up the cobblestone hill to the plaza next to the old church, to Bar Pepe, the flamenco heart of town. As we climb the three steps into the bar, we immediately encounter Donn Pohren, with Ansoninni on one side sporting his silk ascot, and Joselero in his Sunday best on the other. They're recuperating from last night's fiesta over a quiet "menta" beside the pinball machine. Both Gypsies are men in their sixties; both famous as Flamencos - Joselero is a singer, and Ansoninni is a dancer. Ansoninni is from Lebrija, one of the small towns in the area.

The creme de menthe is for Ansoninni's throat, as too many cigarettes and late nights have irritated his throat beyond the repairing capacities of Veterano cognac. Pohren, the faithful aficionado (author of the book Art Of Flamenco) is encouraging them that although there is one last fiesta tonight, the Feria week (which we missed, dammit) is over, and they can rest tomorrow (as if either of them really wanted to!)

After a moment's hesitation, Pohren recognizes Chuck (it had been five years), and in turn Joselero and even Ansoninni, with whom Chuck had little contact. Introductions all around for Susana, and a round of menta, fino, or veterano. We all part company after a little while, only to return that evening.

Up the hill again. Chuck's anticipation is almost unbearable - "Will my old friends be there - will they remember me - what will the reception be?" - etc. The bar is buzzing with action, as is usual this time of night. A few villagers are recognized, and as we are trying to relax with a glass of fino, Pepe, the bar owner calls out to someone on the step. In comes a young, lean Gitano, with thick unruly hair, a white suit, frilly shirt, and a sparkle in his eye. The moment he lays eyes on Chuck, it's like Christmas morning, New Year's eve, and his 21st birthday all rolled into one. The return of the prodigal brother. Abrazos (hugs) from Agustin, mutual pats on the back, and peals of laughter from both men. A moment of silence while Agustin takes a step back to take in "Carlos" at one glance, and Carlos strikes the Gypsy Flamenco pose of holding coat tails front and back, as if dancing por Bulerias. "Ole! Carlos! Arza!

Rounds of fino for Carlos and his mujer (me). The evening progresses and in comes Gonzalo. The same extraordinary welcome, only Gonzalo leaves after a few moments to fetch his wife, La Chica. She is moved to tears at seeing Carlos again, and they go on to talk about how their family has grown to seven children since last time, etc....

Agustin arranges for us to come to the Fiesta, which has been organized for tonight by the small group of American aficionados left over in Morón since the end of the feria. (The feria is a week to ten days of constant celebrating and merrymaking, with contests and exhibitions - much like our own country fairs, only with Flamencos and Flamenco music taking a predominant role.) These fiestas are a difficult diplomatic feat to put together because of the volatile temperaments of everyone involved - artists, aficionados, and extranjeros; those who pay, and those who are just guests.

The bar is slowly emptied, and I am rounded up to carry a couple of chairs down the street to an inside patio, where the fiesta will take place. This is my first night in Morón, and my first fiesta! I'm like a novice on her first night in Rome, being invited to a private religious ceremony with a few of the archbishops.

There is an unspoken ritual involving fiestas; and it was only later I discovered that it had actually started a couple of hours ago, when some of the aficionados like ourselves, and some of the artists like Agustin and Joselero met to establish a pre-fiesta rapport between each other.

Slowly people start drifting into the patio, which is lit only by the light coming in through the windows from the house surrounding it. It's a warm evening, and the nightflowers have a strong fragrance. Agustin is the guitarist of the evening, with Joselero the main singer, and Ansoninni still nursing his throat with his scarf wrapped around his neck. Also present are friends of the artists, relatives, and aficionados, sitting and standing around, exchanging pleasantries. An occasional burst of palmas and jaleo break out - Agustin tunes his guitar, plays a couple of chords, sets it down, and tastes a tapa that his mujer (woman) Tana (an American from San Francisco) has just brought in on a big tray. A verse to Rumba is heard over the voices, and pretty soon everyone begins to feel the warmth of the wine. Agustin begins strumming por Bulerias, and the palmas beat more regularly - timidly at first, and then stronger, as more aficionados join in. The sound of the palmas sordas becomes strong, and Agustin plays with more gusto, with his typical Morón style inherited from Diego del Gaster; strong thumb technique and rasgueado, interspersed with whimsical, imaginative, improvised and/or remembered falsetas. All through, the most important compas, the driving rhythm. I had heard Chuck try to explain compas to me and his students often enough, but I understood it for the first time that night. The guitar is leaning on the steady, yet highly syncopated beat of the palmas, to take off into improvisation and always returning and underlining the rhythm with chording between the falsetas; encouraging and reinforcing the palmeros to feel the rhythm even more. The various participants support and build on each other, and the jaleo becomes more animated with each falseta.

Joselero tests his voice in a "temple" (the "Ayyy" introduction to the cante), and Agustin flows with the ambiente to accompany whatever will come to the old man. The rhythm is still strong, although the palmas quiet down to hear the singer. The frail old man sings a copla (verse) to Bulerias..Ole! And another...Ole! Agustin throws in a particularly humorous falseta remembered from Diego..Arza! Eso es! Joselero finishes with yet another verse, and sits down smiling contentedly to acclamation from all. Agustin continues keeping the rhythm alive. Ansoninni, sore throat and all gets up; snapping his fingers in rhythm, raising arms outward. One

foot points out and back, and then the other.

"Arza, Tio! Vamos, Vamos, 'soninni!" With his head held high and a cocky smile, Ansoninni begins to dance por Bulerias. His old body straight and strong; he is a powerful man - proud as a Gitano who knows and is confident of knowing, he dances now with a roguish smile on his face, his half closed eyes open up in a slit with the rise of one eyebrow, his feet continue on with the same simple step; his arms in a slow, circular movement alternate up across his face and out to the sides, above his shoulders. He faces Carlos and me - "Ole! Asi se Baila!" He stops for just a moment, still in compas, his body sideways. His eyes meet mine just before the desplante (traditional rhythmic signal used as a break in the dance), making sure that everyone knows he is dancing for the extranjera. In a quick change of pace he calls the guitarist to the desplante. Completely in command, and with his tongue-in-cheek superiority he executes one of his own puns, in the last four counts. He used to execute a rather difficult turn in his younger days at this point, but now he gets away with an explanatory movement with a flick of his wrist, and half spins toward the back in the haughty attitude of a young caballero having just accomplished a breathtaking feat to impress a young lady, to the delight of everyone, who had wondered how he would carry through successfully what he had so brazenly begun.

A few more chording compases from Agustin, and Ansoninni tries a verse, but his voice breaks, and he calls on his faithful scarf for support, and ends with a cachondeo por panuelo (joking around with his scarf). Everyone is having a good time, and everyone is bound more and more together by the rhythm. Joselero isn't about to let his old friend outdo him, and he too gets into the action with a desplante.

And on and on, the evening progresses. Later, when the old men are taking a break around the tapas, and Agustin is introducing me to his parents, who had arrived during the dancing. Juan del Gaster, a cousin of Agustin's, picks up the guitar and starts in por Rumba. He plays, sings, and dances all at once, with a gracia all his own, and that only a Gitano from Andalucia can ever hope to possess. But the compas soon reverts to the beloved Bulerias again, and Juan hands the guitar to Chuck for accompaniment, so he can dance unhampered.

Later, Agustin and Joselero return from "despedir" (seeing off) their friends and parents for the night; Joselero falls into the mood of the more jondo (serious, deep) rhythms. There are only a few people left now, and this feels like the turning point in the fiesta where the ambiente could become very serious. Somehow, however, the night is just too serene, and everyone too content for any exploration of the desolate, tragic "ducas negras" of the cante jondo. The night ends a couple of hours later after a session of excellent music of great artistic value, although not as emotionally powerful as one suspects might have happened if the wine had settled just a bit differently.

The next morning there is a post-fiesta huddle with the foreign aficionados over coffee and tostadas on the sidewalk café of Bar Miguel. The sun is inexorable - like steel, the sky so blue, the girls so pretty in their Sunday cottons, that the conversation soon drifts to more frivolous subjects, and our first whole day in Morón is already leading into afternoon siesta.

I'd like to take a few paragraphs to explain a bit about Morón de la Frontera, and the reason that you'll never find it listed in the Guide Michelin. It is a typical small town, with all the characteristics of hundreds of other small towns in Andalucía, with one exception - the rich heritage of the extraordinary music and personality of Diego del Gastor, who passed away several years ago (and with whom Chuck had the opportunity to study). It is very colorful and attractive visually, and could keep an amateur photographer entertained for perhaps a day and a night. But unless you are a dyed-in-the-wool flamenco aficionado, you would do better to spend your vacation time at the coast resorts. At least there is running water, and at night the Spanish dubbed movie version of *Gone With The Wind* isn't so bad, if you've spent the whole day at the beach.

No wonder the Gitanos developed Flamenco to such an intricate and complex art. They had to do something in those bars at night before the advent of television. Now television has invaded all the bars, and the noise of "futball" (soccer) competes with that of the pinball machines everywhere, except in Bar Pepe. It is there, but it is shut off whenever a guitarist starts strumming, and knuckles start beating the compas out on the bar top. Juan Cala interrupts his game of dominos to do a little Gitano two step por Bulerias, the local carpenter puts down his cerveza (beer) and sings a copla....Ole!

That kind of scene is likely to break out at any time of night or day at Bar Pepe. Why there? It is the traditional flamenco hangout in Morón. Agustin lives right next door with his family, and across the hallway Gonzalo and La Chica in Diego del Gastor's old apartment. A block away lives Paco del Gastor, another nephew of Diego's, and considered by everyone to be the best guitarist of all. Paco's brother Juan is also deeply involved in the art (as we saw in the fiesta), and plays guitar, sings, dances, and writes poetry. They all live within earshot of Bar Pepe, and although there is a rivalry between the Rios, Del Gastor, and Torres branches of the family, all guitarists are nephews of the great Diego. They occasionally may not be on speaking terms, but they all respect each other, and listen to each other play (and, naturally, trade material back and forth). Bar Pepe is where most of the action occurs outside of fiestas.

During our first week in Morón, Agustin found us an apartment around the corner from Bar Pepe, on the calle Diego Del Gastor (yes, the city council even named a street after him, and constructed a statue in the city park). Needless to say, we were much happier there, than at the Fonda. Many times we went to bed, thinking everyone so engrossed in the late movie that the day was over, and unexpectedly heard voices doing jaleo in compas, and someone break into the cante.

We'd tear out of our place many times, not wanting to miss a second of what was happening. Lots of times it would die down as quickly as it had started, but other times we'd arrive just as one of the local poets was warming up to a spirit-of-the-moment recitation, or Agustin, tired of practicing in his house, had come down for a fino, and for a break started playing for his friends.

Although the living conditions were primitive (to say the least), we felt so excited by our constant close contact with the art for the whole time we were there, that we survived on Flamenco alone. The art surrounded us. When it wasn't happening live, someone was always playing a tape they had brought back from a fiesta, or some housewife had her transistor radio turned on, on her way to market, and we'd hear Antonio Mairena singing Soleares de Alcalá at 10 A.M. in the morning. It is difficult to describe the sensation of being around so much live afición and art, after years of living in a vacuum, where the only Flamenco is your own or your well worn records.

La Chica and Gonzalo had us over to their house for lunch soon after we arrived, as relatives receiving a brother and his new wife. After the first bottle of wine was finished, and the kids quieted, Gonzalo asked Chuck to play for them. At first they listened a bit stiffly, but as they began to recognize more and more Diego falsetas, and feeling the compas from Chuck's guitar in the very same Morón style they love and with which they are familiar, Chica's fingers started tapping the table top quietly, Gonzalo's foot started moving in rhythm, and the next thing we knew it was happening again.

Almost against their wills, Gonzalo and La Chica were so moved by Carlos' playing; even after all those years (seven years), he had known enough to carry the style and compas inside, and came back playing far better than when he had left. We threw away the empty wine bottle, and opened the bottle of gin we had brought. Then Chica sang, her little girl danced por Soleares, her son por Farruca; they asked me to get up and dance, and that's when we first mentioned how we had come here, thanks to a grant from Canada, and what we were hoping to find.

Without a moment's hesitation, Gonzalo took over and reassured us in his unique (very decisive) manner that we were not to worry; he would take care of everything - find dancers for me, etc., and that we would have a fiesta that we would not soon forget.

.....And did we ever!

I spoke earlier about the ritual that precedes and is part of a fiesta. Well, in this case, it was literally a campaign set up by Gonzalo, to recruit artistic members of Chica's family (Chica is also a niece of Diego's). There was a high council family meeting to discuss the best ways, people, place and time for the event to take place. For over a week, Gonzalo could be seen wearing his serious entrepreneur attitude in whispered conversations in the back of the bar, on the church steps, or in the marketplace. More and more, people unknown to me would bid me a "Buena Dia" on the street, as if they knew me, and were letting me know that they too, were conniving with us.

We were called to an organizational meeting one day, at Gonzalo's and Chica's. After they invited us to sit across the table, Gonzalo leaned over and in a low voice asked us if there was anyone we would particularly like to invite, and they both held their breaths as we answered. The purpose of the conversation was to explain to us without hurting our feelings that in order for this fiesta to be successful, and for the right people to come and be at ease, it would have to come off strictly as a family reunion; a fiesta given by Gonzalo and Chica for Carlos as a welcoming party for whom they felt as close to their hearts as their own family. But for that to come off successfully, there could be no other extranjeros there.

I mean! ---- It is touchy enough to convince these people (who are non-professional) to perform at a party in honor of a foreigner and his wife, but they wouldn't understand the presence of anyone else. What a relief for both of them, when we told them that it was perfectly understandable, and that we were leaving him completely in charge of the invites. That explained a lot about all those people I didn't know recognizing us, or whispering as we went by.

The day of the fiesta arrived. Chica came knocking at the door early after breakfast with her empty shopping bag hanging from her arm, and her youngest boy tugging at her skirt on the other side. Off we went to the marketplace to buy tapa materials for the fiesta. We stopped at one stall to buy the morcilla, and in a low voice the stall keeper was told about the reason we were buying it.

At the next stall we bought some garlic olives, and again the night's fiesta came up. Then we got some grapes, and the fruit lady asked us if they were for the fiesta. As we were crossing over to get some good chorizo, a woman yelled at Chica, enquiring where the fiesta was to be held. A few friends of Chica walked along with us discussing the preparations when we got to the toy stall (Agustin's mother's stall). The troupe stopped, and I counted ten ladies huddling around the little old abuela (grandmother), like workers around the queen bee. They all listened as she spoke in aloud voice (so everyone in the marketplace could hear) about what should be done with the many children of all the parents that would be at the fiesta.

I was completely ignored outside the circle, my arms aching from the weight of the food. Meanwhile, our "secret" fiesta was being discussed for all to hear at the marketplace. We left the market proper, and headed for the bakery. As we were waiting to be served, in came Gonzalo, making his way towards us through the throngs of ladies (all dressed in black) in their shawls.

Truly Gonzalo was in glowing form. He was wearing his freshly cleaned lavender shirt, his pied de poule black and white trousers, his two toned shoes, and his checkered sport jacket. And not to forget his silk ascot around his neck. His hair had been recently tamed with a wet comb, and was shining almost as much as his proud and happy smile. I think he had grown a couple of inches taller since I had last seen him.

When Chica caught a glance at her man, looking so guapo (handsome), she grew a couple of inches taller herself. Gonzalo asked Chica a few relevant questions about what had been bought and reminded us in an authoritative manner not to forget the cheese, and to buy the good stuff, the Manchego viejo - the really ripe cheese that practically walks by itself, and is terrific with fino.

He left with an announcement that he was going to our house to get the liquor with Carlos. I noticed that he chose the long way to go there, through the marketplace, probably so that he could tell his friends in the plaza that he had too many things to prepare for the evening to be able to stop and chat. Chica and I finally got back to our little flat to deposit these mounds of food. A little while after she left, Chuck arrived in high spirits. It was only about 1 pm by now, and already the anticipation of the evening to come was getting us as giddy and excited as teenagers on the afternoon before the prom. After having seen Gonzalo in his party duds, Chuck wasn't going to let his friend show him up in the matter of nattiness. So we unpacked the gray pinstriped suit that makes him look like a member of the Capone family, cleaned his prescription shades, and polished his black boots. Unfortunately, we did not have his dark shirt and white tie, but we settled for a drip dry permanent press white shirt, his fake ruby cufflinks, and one of my scarves as an ascot. We couldn't wait for the hour to come for the glass of fino at the bar before the fiesta, but we didn't want to blow our entrance by arriving too early.

The hour finally arrived, and Chuck and I walked down to Bar Pepe, where we caught Gonzalo a bit off guard with his jacket off, just sort of taking a moment off duty. When he saw Chuck, he straightened up, smiled, opened his arms, raised his eyebrows, and cried out "Carlos! Que guapo estas!" - Carlos, with half closed eyes struck his macho pose with one arm around his mujer's shoulders and said, "Claro! I'm going to a fiesta, you know!" At which both men broke up with laughter and toasted with Tio Pepe.

The fiesta was to take place next door to bar Pepe in Gonzalo's enclosed patio. While the men were bringing and distributing straw chairs around in a circle, and discussing the best place to put the food, the women were upstairs in Chica's kitchen getting the tapas ready to bring down. They were all wearing their pretty vestidos, and were chatting away, getting to know me. Once reassured as to where I was at, personality-wise, it was time to go down to the patio. One last pat of the hair, and smoothing down of the skirt, and off we went, (about ten of us) to join the men, who were already tasting the refreshments.

Agustin arrived with Andorrano, another cousin, and the son of Joselero, a professional dancer. Some more people came in and the fiesta got under way. As more and more people drifted in, family and friends, things began to get involved. Andorrano sang and danced with only a trace of commercial slickness; his steps were all on-the-spot improvisations, but you could note the professionalism in his technique and carriage.

Then Chica sang in her inimitable manner, with the tension growing in her voice, and eyes closed and arms stretched out, forward, sitting on the edge of her chair, her whole body vibrating, sang of love and youth gone, in the compas of Bulerias. Then one of her coplas would remind Andorrano of one that he knew, and then Chica would answer again, with the rest of us accompanying all the while with jaleo and palmas.

By this time, there must have been thirty adults and about as many children (none of the plans for keeping them in bed had done any good). They were all respectfully quiet; in fact, they even added their own ambiente, when each one of them got up in turn to do a little step - each one taken just as seriously as the adults and encouraged with jaleo and palmas. An elderly lady in her late sixties did a short desplante to the great pleasure of everyone there.

Milagro, Agustin's sister, danced beautifully. This lovely person, mother of eight children, who had not danced for extranjeros before, got up when her husband Gitanito began to sing. They first felt a bit self conscious, but soon forgot the strangers, and stimulated by the reaction of family and friends created pure artistic expression that night. Everyone was happy, and the fiesta again revolved around Bulerias and Rumba. At one point everyone seemed under a spell, one with the rhythm, anticipating what the dancer or singer of the moment would do next. One verse would end and someone else would pick it up with another, or Agustin would play an appropriate falseta, keeping the feeling alive.

One of the young girls would be encouraged to get up and dance. The rhythm never stopped. They even coaxed me into getting up for a couple of desplantes. I don't have to tell you how strange it felt for me to be dancing Bulerias for Morón Gitanos. Then Tana danced, Chuck played guitar, while Agustin sang. Finally the night turned into morning, and little children who had fallen asleep in the corners and on granny's and mommy's laps were picked up, and the fiesta broke up and we all went home, exhausted and happy.

The fiesta had been a great success, and we thanked Gonzalo the next day, when he and Chica came over to our house to listen to a tape of parts of it, as he had asked us to tape Chica's singing. We then started the diplomatic wheels going again with Gonzalo, enquiring as whether Milagro might give me lessons. Again, after a few days of high council meetings with Agustin and family, it was agreed that we'd hire Chica as the singer for 300 p's (\$6) a lesson, and Milagro as instructor for 500 p's, with chuck the guitarist, and the time length of the lesson open. It turned out that I never got away with less than 3 hours of intensive instruction - quite a difference from Madrid.

We started having the lessons in Chica's house in the afternoon after the kids had been whisked back to school, and the housework and shopping had been done for the day. Every day for the first ten days or so, the lesson was a village hen party. Everybody would show up for a minute and stay a couple of hours, doing palmas, criticizing, encouraging, and generally having a good time, from the grandmother who lived next door to the friend that came with the distant cousin down the street. Talk about breaking down my inhibitions about dancing for Gitanos! Most of the time, Chuck was the accompanist, but occasionally Agustin came "so I could get used to a different guitarist". After awhile there were so many women sitting in Chica's small kitchen that there was just no place to dance, and I realized that Milagro was getting annoyed and inhibited about her teaching as well. She was taking the women's comments about my dance as a reflection of her teaching ability, so on the pretext that I was having trouble concentrating with all these people around, we established a new policy of not allowing anyone in. In fact, we even forbade Chuck to accompany, relying only on Chica's singing and the palmas to carry the rhythm.

The first day we started the new policy of just the three of us, we found that we were much more at ease, because each of us had been unconsciously concerned with our performance in the eyes of the others outside our little group. But now we were in the wings, and we could let down our hair. We reviewed what I had learned until then, and Milagro tried a few steps she vaguely remembered from years back, not worrying too much if they didn't come out right the first time, and working on them till she remembered them correctly, and I was starting to pick them up myself, all of us learning together. That was when Chica reached for the gin bottle that we had brought to lunch a week ago, and she poured all of us a shot; and we sipped at it with a feeling of great conspiracy between desplantes.

This relaxed atmosphere made things a whole lot easier all around. Chica started to improvise little verses, and Milagro would improvise a step, and encourage me to do the same, and cheered me on when I did something good, and scolded me (in a friendly manner) when I lost compas or did a particularly non-flamenco movement. I finally began to understand Bulerias, by improvising in it under their guidance.

After that, we almost always had our lessons privately. Sometimes Chica (who we discovered later was pregnant), would send her cousin Eugenia to sing in her place, when she was feeling ill. We moved the classes to Milagro's house, and would sometimes still be at it when Gitanito came home from work, and he'd take over the singing himself.

Chuck started coming again to the lessons, and after Milagro agreed, he brought the camera. He had been taking films of various people and places outside so they would get used to the idea, and not treat it as such a big deal when it came to the dancing. At first she was a bit self-conscious, but the next time Chuck came with the camera he was back from a paella dinner at Bar Pepe for some other Americans that were leaving, and obviously had had his share of fino. (Maybe he was putting it on a bit). Milagro became a lot less shy, and got right into her dance after a few minute of Chuck's carrying on, and danced with ease for the camera while Eugenia sang.

On the day of our last lesson, Gitanito happened to be there, and Gonzalo came in unexpectedly to visit. Well, we got everybody in the act, that time - we all knew, though they wouldn't admit it for the world, that they wanted to be on the dance films as well, and that, after all, not only the women were flamencos worthy of being filmed.

We never got past dancing Bulerias and Rumba, which were all I've ever seen Milagro dance. But I could spend a lifetime with Bulerias alone; the rhythm is so complex, and has so many possibilities once it is understood. And once you learn the different changes and how to signal them to a guitarist and singer, the potential for personal expression is unlimited, as well as being the most fun rhythm around.

Like Antonio Gades says in the film *Los Tarantos* - "Me voy a bailar la Buleria in la Gloria". When I was in Morón, I felt that those should be my last words too (I still do, when I hear Chuck practicing Bulerias in the next room).

As I said before, the night life in Morón can be pretty hard to take if you're not a Flamenco (and even if you are, because flamenco doesn't happen every night). But there is always Sevilla, which is about two hours drive away.

One night, Tana, Agustin, Chuck, and I piled into Tana's little old Seat, and off we went on the bumpy road to Sevilla - across the fields, headed for yet another tablao. After Madrid, we weren't exactly keen on the idea, but Tana managed to convince Agustin to tear himself away from his beloved Morón and his guitar, and take her to see Manuela Carrasco, the current flamenco dance star of Spain. We had seen her in an impromptu Bulerias in Café Chinitas, and she had been extremely impressive then, even in her casual slacks and high platform shoes (in which it is virtually impossible to dance - but dance she did!)

So off we went, with Agustin in his white suit, and Chuck in his gangster outfit, and Tana and I in our best dresses. We arrived early enough to have a couple of copas in the Barrio Santa Cruz, where the drinks are much cheaper than in the tablao.

On the whole, the show at "Los Gallos" (the tablao we went to in Sevilla) was much better than anywhere else, although they have the same package with the perennial blonde rumba dancer, and the raven haired sexy voiced "typical" Gitana in the polka dots. However, the artistic quality was much, much better than in Madrid - one girl was a bit academic, and only one other was really offensive, but all the others were quite good, and projected that special Andaluz gracia which is almost impossible to translate.

Manuela Carrasco was absolutely outstanding, and deserving of all the publicity and fame. This young Gypsy girl (who is no more than 18), just took over the whole tablao, even with the other dancers a good as they were. Her stage presence is powerful; her movements, although wide and encompassing are perfectly controlled - now dynamic, now subtle. She commands the stage like a queen, yet is still as earthy as any Gitana ever was. The interplay between herself, her father, her singer, and her accompanist (Ramon Amador, the best guitarist we heard in Spain) is so smooth, the buildups so powerful, and the flow of the rhythm and expression held together so tightly that the feeling of the dance grows, and all your attention is riveted on that young woman as she holds you in suspense with the strength of her projection. The most amazing thing about her performance is that it looks improvised on the moment, and yet I know it can't be, because I know how difficult it is to put such a performance with the arts of those people woven so tightly together; but it still came across as fresh and uncontrived.

If she had been in Sevilla for a longer contract, we would have taken the bus to see her again; she would have been worth another closet in Sevilla for the night.

Every night we spent in Morón was comfortably warm; enough to stay out in light clothes until sleep, exhaustion, or boredom forced us back home. Most nights we'd come back from "cena" at Bar Miguel around 10, and wander up to Bar Pepe for a nightcap, to talk things over with Gonzalo, or Donn Pohren, or whoever happened to be sitting out on the plaza under the street lamp.

Sometimes all we'd hear would be the pinball machine, competing with the TV, inside the bar, and sometimes there would be no other noises than dogs fighting, children playing, and their mothers calling out for them to come home to bed. But sometimes the palmas would break out, out of the blue, or Juan would start reciting his improvised poetry for a half circle of aficionados. The translated verses reminded us strangely of "Mary had a little lamb", recited very dramatically; the Gypsies have that tongue-in-cheek humor that counterbalances the intensity with which they live life and feel flamenco. It is that sense of humor and sense of life that produces finally those beautiful viejos (old men), with their weatherbeaten faces and threadbare suits, who walk the main street with their heads held high, their backs straight, their Cordoba hats at precisely the right angle, and the toothpick in the corner of their mouth, as if they owned the whole world (and perhaps they do).

Anyway, on one of those hot nights things were as quiet as could be; I was sitting with Eugenia, and she introduced me to Milagro's eldest daughter, who was visiting from Sevilla, where she is staying with her uncle's family. (Her uncle, Pepe Rios, is a well known dancer and teacher in Sevilla). She had just started studying at his academy a couple of months before. Well, one thing led to another, and three other Gypsy girls I had met at one of the fiestas joined us after awhile, and we all climbed up to Eugenia's house with a couple of bottles of wine and a big bag of chips. We pushed the crib in the alcove by the window, sat the other kids down with the bag of chips, and Eugenia started singing por Bulerias, with the others doing palmas. Milagro's daughter was anxious to show us her new steps; then I danced, and we swapped steps - then another girl wanted to learn a desplante; and then we changed to Rumba. Then a couple of grandmothers, having heard the palmas outside, came wandering in; somebody went down for more wine, and we went on singing and dancing until Eugenia's husband came home from work. Then we sort of got inhibited and the impromptu party broke up.

When I came outside, Chuck was wild with curiosity; he kept hearing all those terrific palmas and singing, and was dying to come up, but was afraid of upsetting the atmosphere.

How difficult it is for me to talk about Morón in faithful terms. It was a magic place for me, and has been for other foreign flamencos who have been there. Yet, when you try to break down the reason why it is so fantastic, it is just that the people there are so genuine, and such natural artists in their varying degrees. Some have worked to develop their arts, while others have just picked it up by osmosis; but everyone in the flamenco circle really loves and respects the art, and values it as we value the air we breathe. We don't think about it, but we would be destroyed without it.

Well, time went by much too quickly; we had hoped to prolong our stay with revenue from Chuck's course, but the mail strike cut the ground from under our feet, and we had to leave. Back in Madrid, we had to wait five days before we could get a flight back to Montreal. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise, because we saw Marcella del Real dance in La Pacheca, which is a tablao on the outskirts of Madrid.

Madrid Redux

We went to La Pacheca with the certainty of seeing one more depressing pseudo-flamenco horror show. But we went anyway, on the premise that one can always learn, even if it is only what not to do. The show was mediocre in comparison with others in Madrid (and the club itself a ripoff), and the star danced well, although after Morón it was difficult for us to relate to her.

But Marcela really impressed us; among the other girls there she immediately stood out by her unquestionable artistic integrity, projecting a strength and "aire" very similar to that of Manuela Carrasco in Sevilla. She was impressive in her choice of movement and choreography, and every bit as good as Manuela.

I went back by myself the next evening, and as it turned out, we had met before in the studio of Mercedes Leon, three years before. In fact she, two other girls, and I had been hired to do bit parts for the national television in Madrid, and we had spent the best part of a week standing around the studio waiting for our turn to perform.

We made a date to meet the next day with Chuck. She then generously agreed to let us film some of her dances the next day. We were extremely pressed for time, and we were leaving on Friday, and this was Wednesday. Therefore, Chuck and Marcela didn't have any time to practice at all before we shot the films; in fact we were very lucky to find a large enough studio.

However, we met a few hours before studio time, so we could at least get to know each other better. The more we talked with Marcela that afternoon, the more we liked her. We found that we shared her views on many aspects of the art, and the way she talked confirmed our feeling about the kind of dedication and the real sense of artistic integrity with which she approached her dance; as an art form that had to be studied, respected, and loved. Dancing for her was not only a way of living; that she was building her career as a life's work, slowly and carefully, and not seeking fame and prestige by condescending to cheapen the dance. She also emphasized the importance of the music to her; very often academy trained dancers consider the music to be secondary - they learn routines that are never varied, and are independent of the accompanying artist. (Had we met Marcela earlier, we would have asked her to bring a singer with whom she felt "a gusto", but under the circumstances, Chuck had to provide the singing as well as the guitar accompaniment).

After a few minutes, only to warm up, Marcela and Chuck began to perform for my camera and tape recorder. She danced two beautiful jondo dances, a Soleares and a Siguiriyas, with a beautiful understanding of the tensions involved in the subtle differences between them. She also did a great Alegrias, a Bulerias, and a bit of Rumba for us. We had to quickly pack up our gear and leave, then, as the students for the ballet class started clamoring at the door.

Then the three of us went out to unwind over a well-earned lunch, which went on until late in the afternoon, and then for a café solo, as afternoon turned into evening. Marcela left us to get ready for her performance, and Chuck and I were left with the certainty that we had not only met and obtained films from a valuable artist, but that we had also made a real friend within the art.

It is thanks to artists like Marcela and Manuela that the art of Flamenco dance continues to grow and survive as the beautiful art it can be. Stage flamenco, although derived from the art of the fiesta, fills a completely different need, and has to stand on its own as a different means of expression. Concert artists like Manuela and Marcella are among the few that promote good flamenco.

No art form has been misrepresented more often than flamenco, even in Spain. The great majority of Spaniards know absolutely nothing about the art, and are prone to consider the tablaos as a form of leg show (which, for the most part, indeed they are). A Spaniard, however, even though he despises the art, will never admit to knowing less than a foreigner, unless confronted with the art in performance. (A good test is to see if they can do palmas por Bulerias).

The only logical places to look for manifestations of the art outside of Spain, would be in Spanish establishments; restaurants, or nightclubs. A great number of Spanish theme restaurants seem to be run by corporate holding companies, who know nothing about Spanish pop music, let alone flamenco.

Next are the Spanish restaurant owners, virtually none of whom come from Andalucia (no Andalucian in his right mind would ever leave his province to start a business in a foreign country). As a result, most of the Spanish restaurants run by Spaniards are run by Basques, Catalans, or by the hardest of the plastic set, the Madrilenos. They are under the conviction that what appeals to a Spanish public will appeal to the world in general, which is the reason the most "flamenco" restaurants fold.

There are gross misuses of the art in advertisements of products. (A particularly disgusting example is the recent television commercial advertising a trip to Spain through the sale of lottery tickets). Countless artists, like Manitas de Plata, are completely ignorant of the art, or "sin verguenza" in their presentation of it.

Yet when people are presented with the authentic thing, in a lecture demonstration, or a class, with artists of good caliber and integrity, they do turn on to the art, and want more. And the more they learn about it the more they grow to love it. Some of us even are so touched so deeply that our whole lives become a quest for the truth and beauty of the art, and learn as much as we can, while being forced to sift through the piles of garbage and misinformation to find the gems. Yet the art still lives, in Morón, Lebrija, and in the hearts and artistic lives of real artists everywhere; in unrecognized and lonely artists in Montreal, Vancouver, Toronto, Los Angeles .. never in an accessible way, and nearly always underground. The artists that are commercially successful have lost the edge of the wit of the Bulerias and the ducas negras of the Siguiriyas (which can be communicated in concert, but never in a club). It is almost a truism that only the mediocre artists are successful (with some happy exceptions).

I wish that the good flamenco could surface more often, and that the public could get a real experience of the power and beauty that flamenco can convey. We do the best we can.

Technical Information

If you go to Spain looking for a teacher, there is no alternative than to come prepared to shop around. There are good dancers, but you really have to seek them out; a good source of basic information is Donn Pohren's book, the Art of Flamenco, which is an absolute bible for anyone involved in any way with the art.

The important thing is to try to gather as much information about the art as you can before leaving, as Spain is very expensive these days. A lot of time can be spent learning basics in Spain, which could have been spent learning them here, under conditions far more favorable to a native in his own land. This applies especially to student singers and guitarists, who can get a good foundation from records, once the basic techniques are understood. For dancers, it is much more difficult, but a great deal can be learned about dance structure from records, and that is half the battle; with analytical listening it is possible to learn to distinguish the rhythmic forms and their different emotional contexts. Otherwise, a dancer arriving in Spain completely ignorant about the art will find most of the teaching methods very confusing and unclear, largely because the dance depends on the music, and the music itself is quite complex.

She will end up discouraged, and believing what the Spaniards all tend to believe themselves; that the understanding of the rhythms is hereditary; it is either in your blood, or you'll never learn it. This is because they teach a foreigner with no experience with the music in the same way they teach a Spaniard who at least has been exposed to the sound of Spanish music (if not Flamenco) all his life. So the first requirement is a good understanding of the compas families of Flamenco.

A cassette tape recorder will prove invaluable for lessons - record every minute, and go over it again in your pension at night. It is also helpful to devise a convenient notation for footwork. If you can use a movie camera (or video recorder - ed.) (that is, if the teacher will let you, which is unlikely), you can use the fast film (ASA 160) in an appropriate camera. If you understand compas, it won't be too difficult to coordinate the audio tape and the film when you study it. (not usually necessary with sound/video available today - ed.)

Technical advice in Spain

Rid yourself of the fantasy that it is a romantic thing to do. Before you leave :

1. Concerts of Spanish Companies on tour, and Spanish imports at local Tablaos. (if you see a dancer with a style you like, approach her for lessons. If she has time, I'm sure she would welcome the extra income, and it will prepare you for the kind of teaching you'll encounter in Spain).

2. Records -

The important things to learn from records are:

- To distinguish the mood and timing of each specific toque.
- To learn to count the cyclic rhythms correctly, the key to compas.
- Analyze the structures of the dances.
- Figure out the rhythmic patterns of the escobillas by slowing down your tapes or records and trying to do them yourself.
- To help work out a clear notation for your dances.

A. Starting with the general breakdown of the dance in its general sections, counting how many compases are in each section, and the relation between the singer and dancer.

B. Go back compas by compas, tempo by tempo, count how many foot beats per compas, figure out whether the dancer is performing doublets, triplets, quadruplets, etc., and if the footwork is counter or syncopated to the music.

These are all ways to develop your ear and sense of compas.

3. Books - The Art of Flamenco (mentioned above). This book will help you understand more about the various rhythms and help get more out of the records.

4. Castanets - you should learn by yourself or with a local teacher before you go, because if you study in an academy you'll have to know them and you can waste a lot of precious time learning them in Spain.

5. Language - the more Spanish you know the better, especially if you have tendencies of being paranoid (and you will be if you hang around at Amor de Dios long enough)

Once you've set the date

1. A practice skirt even if you want to get one there; it might take longer than you expect to find one, or a seamstress to make you one, and the prices are outrageous.

2. Two pairs of shoes. The soles of your shoes wear out twice as fast in Amor de Dios than at home; whether it is due to the quality of the floors or the extra energy one seems to acquire in that ambiente, I'm not sure, but with the two pairs you can alternate pairs at the zapatero (shoe maker). If you are having new ones made, you'll be glad to have your old comfies when the new ones come, they seem to take forever to get broken in.

3. A cassette recorder small enough to be inconspicuous if it has to, but sturdy enough also. Take it everywhere and leave it on "record" continuously during lessons and classes, if you can.

4. A still camera, for friends and places but also costumes that you won't find on picture post cards.

5. A moving picture camera w/ sound (or better yet, a video camera). But go with the attitude that you probably won't get to use it for filming dancers, although wouldn't you kick yourself if the opportunity arose and didn't you have one? I can't caution you enough to use diplomacy if you plan on doing filming. Most dancers are extremely possessive of their material and won't let you film it unless you have something of equal value to give in return.

6. The minimum of clothes and things in your suit case. Remember you'll be coming back with a lot more than you have when you leave.

When you're there :

In Madrid:

The center where you will get the most information is La Granja, calle Amor de Dios off calle Alcala (the main rehearsal studio in Madrid).

The most reputable shoe maker: Gallardo.

The best castanet maker : Victor Galiano

Penascales, 31 telef: 246-5506

Madrid 28

(difficult to find; works in his own apartment)

Best Tabalaos :

In Madrid: Café Chinitas, Los Canasteros, Coral de Pacheca

In Sevilla: Los Gallos in Barrio Santa Cruz

Best dancers:

Manuela Carrasco, Marcella del Real

Best Teachers:

In Madrid: Mercedes Leon, Maria Magdalena, Paco Fernandez, Ciro

In Sevilla: Matilde Corral, Pepe Rios

Places to buy records:

in Madrid: Union Musicale Espanola, Corte Ingles in Plaza del Sol

In Sevilla: Casa Damas on calle Sierpes

For a cheap army bag to take your loot home (in Madrid): The Rastro (flea market) on Sunday Morning.