

## FLAMENCO THAT LEFT US

### EL FLAMENCO QUE NOS DEJÓ

*Enrique Martínez, M.A.*

New York, N.Y. USA / Barcelona, Spain

#### **Abstract**

Flamenco, a popular folkloric art, is the expression of many people centered mostly around the south of Spain and, at least in great measure, within the gypsy community. After the 1960's, the radical transformation of the old Spanish socioeconomical conditions that had kept the gypsy familiar organizations within their ancestral, traditional ways of working and living, has profoundly affected this art form, and this change is reflected in both the sound and texts of flamenco.

**Key words:** Flamenco, tradition, gypsy, folklore

#### **Resumen**

El flamenco, un arte folclórico del pueblo, es la expresión de mucha gente que vive principalmente en el sur de España y, en gran medida, dentro de la comunidad gitana. Tras la década de 1960, la profunda transformación de las condiciones socioeconómicas españolas--las mismas que hasta entonces permitieron a las organizaciones familiares gitanas mantener sus formas ancestrales y tradicionales de trabajar y de vivir--ha afectado profundamente a esta forma de arte, y este cambio se refleja tanto en el sonido como en los textos de flamenco.

**Palabras clave:** Flamenco, tradición, gitano, folklore

#### **Introduction**

It is hard to understand what flamenco was like, and how it survived the depths of the modern Spanish dark ages (the 1940's and 50's). A period, after the Spanish Civil War and the subsequent World War II, that had left Spain in ruins.

It is difficult to translate what this art meant for the gypsies and the few neighbors that lived close to them. They all secretly shared a living art, a folk art, one that reflected the life of the people that expressed their daily living in singing.

*Secret* may not be the right word to describe it. Gypsies' isolation from the surrounding society made them both suspicious and disliked. Flamenco was not banned but looked down upon as an expression of a marginalized people. Miguel Funi, the last artist of the great generation of

*festeros* still alive, told me once that he remembered hearing, as a child, the *payos arrieros*<sup>1</sup> saying about the flamencos singing in a *venta*<sup>2</sup>: “look, there they are, the gypsies, barking!” (Funi, 1994) In Franco’s 1950s, flamenco was generally ignored, except for an official, edulcorated version for the general audience later spilling into the movies. (National choirs and musical formations were popular in Europe and America during this period.) Meanwhile, the late guitarist Pedro Bacán told me, there were forms of flamenco like the *Alboreás*, that gypsies would not sing in public and kept for their own celebrations.

Nevertheless, flamenco survived also, in part, because of some affluent people in the Franco regime that could afford nights of partying, which included flamenco singing all night, and who fed a cadre of professional artists that came out of the flamenco traditional families. Paco de Lucia’s father was among them, to mention one.

Salvador Távora—now dead, the director of a groundbreaking flamenco play in the seventies, Quejío—described his youth as a bullfighter and flamenco singer prior to directing, in these terms: “*It was not being a bullfighter to earn money, but because that is what happened in the neighborhood. The same was with cante (flamenco singing). There were singers who were true political leaders because of the lyrics they sang. In all the bars there were signs saying: 'Singing forbidden'. Only singing said what could not be said.*” (Sevilla, S. & Távora, S. 2018)

He added: “[flamenco is] ... *the direct expression of the pain of a people. Imagine how strong it has to be , so as to turn it into its opposite: into a joyful, boisterous and entertaining expression, when flamenco is the deep cry of the people ... [Bad flamenco] does a lot of damage to the real one. There is a lot of flamenco with brilliance and posing contrary to flamenco. The hardness that it has, has been erased and blurred.*” (Sevilla, S. & Távora, S. 2018)

Tía Anica La Piriñaca, a gypsy singer departed a decade ago, left it said in the most flamenco way: “*Cuando canto a gusto la boca me sabe a sangre.*” [“*When I sing at ease, my mouth tastes of blood*”] (Soto, J. 2011)

Like to other minorities, changes in the modern way of life have meant deep changes in their life, and therefore in its reflection, flamenco. Their traditional professions no longer exist. They were smiths (the singers of *siguiriyas*), miners (authors of *mineras* and *tarantas*), horse traders, salesmen in the small-town weekly markets, etc.

Today, the emptiness of the Spanish inlands, one of the less inhabited places in Europe, has pushed all their inhabitants (gypsies and non-gypsies alike) to the cities in search of means to make a living. This has inevitably forced a change of lifestyle for all these country and small-town people converted into city dormitory dwellers. It forced the separation of families and disaggregation of communities that were the breeding ground from which flamenco extracted its voice. Also, gypsies have further been displaced from gentrified city areas, to remote, poorly communicated habitats, housing projects specifically created for them. The *Polígono Sur* in the outskirts of Seville contains 3000 apartments for the gypsies that once populated the ‘other’ side

---

<sup>1</sup> non gypsy waggoneers, transporters of goods in mule carts

<sup>2</sup> countryside inn

of the city river, known for hundreds of years as the barrio of Triana, in the heart of the city, where the Soleá was sang with a specific style. A well-known guitar player living in the barren Polígono told me in the 1990's that there are only three ways nowadays for these people there to make a living: as ambling pushcart vendors (for which they were not getting legal permits), as drug peddlers, or as flamenco artists.

Seville and Madrid were traditional places for flamencos to perform shows since the late nineteenth century and artists moved there in search of work. In the 1970's, and besides the *señoritos* of Franco's regime, the business of mass tourism, and the relative affluence of the Spaniards gave flamenco a further push into fame. Flamenco folklore started absorbing from the new environment. Several artists incorporated harmonies, beats and instruments from the city culture. Some fell prey to the maladies of the time, illegal drugs, a fact that appears in the songs of the time.

When listening to flamenco today, it is often hard to understand the meaning of the recordings we have left from the 1950's and earlier. In a way, for many it is like reading Shakespeare or Cervantes, whose texts are almost incomprehensible texts unless one learns something about the historical, social, and linguistic context.

In the back cover of what was to be his last recording, Antonio Núñez, 'El Chocolate', the gypsy singer of dark note songs expressed it his way: "I remember with sadness a great and universal flamenco. A spiritual and beautiful flamenco to which many men and women 'artists and amateurs' contributed to make it one of the music most recognized in the world, and I think it is leaving us. I am left alone [*"Me estoy quedando solo"*] (Núñez, A. 2005)

The flamenco of the shoeless gypsy dancers, of the knuckle hitting the tabletop or the crook thumping on the wagon floor, of filling the mouth with blood is, for the most part, the flamenco that left us.

## Summary

Flamenco has evolved radically since the sixties due to its environment, once rural and primitive, is now urban and multicultural, and its referents have changed to an extent that made a multitude of lyrics and forms disappear or remain as an anachronism, a reminder of former times.

## Attachment

**Original excerpt from the interview** Sevilla, S. (interviewer) & Távora, Salvador (interviewee). (2018, September,11). La entrevista final. El Mundo. Excerpts available at <https://www.elmundo.es/papel/lideres/2018/09/11/5b955f13ca474148448b4588.html>

Távora: *"No era ser torero por ganar dinero, sino porque es lo que había en el barrio. Lo del cante era igual. Aquí había cantaores que eran verdaderos líderes políticos por las letras que cantaban. En todos los bares había carteles en los que ponía 'prohibido cantar'. Sólo cantando se decía lo que no se podía decir."*

Sevilla: *"¿Qué es el flamenco?"*

Távora: *Fíjate qué fuerza tiene que tener para convertirlo en lo contrario: en una expresión alegre, bullanguera y de entretenimiento, cuando el flamenco es grito hondo del pueblo.*”

Sevilla: “*¿Hay mucho flamenco malo?*”

Távora: *Sí, y hace mucho daño al de verdad. Hay mucho flamenco de brillo y de poses contrarias al flamenco. La dureza que tiene se ha ido borrando y difuminando.*”

## References

1. Funi, M. (1994). Personal conversation with the author.
2. Sevilla, S. (interviewer) & Távora, Salvador (interviewee). (2018, September,11). La entrevista final. El Mundo. Excepts available at <https://www.elmundo.es/papel/lideres/2018/09/11/5b955f13ca474148448b4588.html>
3. Soto, Jesús (author). (2011, September,13). “Cuando canto a gusto, la boca me sabe a sangre”. Más Jerez. Article available at <https://masjerez.com/noticias/cuando-canto-a-gustola-boca-me-sabe-a-sangre-por-jesus-soto?page=7>
4. Núñez, Antonio 'El Chocolate'. (2005). Mis setenta años con el cante. [CD B000HOLAR6]. Universal Music, S.L. Spain.  
Back cover: “Recuerdo con tristeza un Flamenco grande y universal. Un flamenco espiritual y hermoso que muchos hombres y mujeres "artistas y aficionados" contribuyeron a que sea una de las músicas más reconocidas del mundo, y creo que se nos va. Me estoy quedando solo.” Signed: Antonio Núñez.

## Contact

Enrique Martínez, M.A.

Language teacher and lecturer in bilingualism; Author of *Fully Structured Software Development methodology*;, Former CEO, CoSo Inc.

New York, N.Y. USA

[enriquemail@gmail.com](mailto:enriquemail@gmail.com)