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## The Ballad of Gypsy Davy

by  
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'Round midnight at the Albatross Pub on San Pablo Avenue, the Thursday night flamenco follies are about to begin. House guitarist Kenny Parker, aka "Keni El Lebrijano," a stocky, pony-tailed Berkeley psychologist, french car mechanic, and denizen of Chez Panisse, has finished his solo playing for the night and joins a gaggle of admirers, students, and aficionados for an impromptu fiesta. Seated on benches around a long, tree-trunk slab of a table cluttered with glasses of red wine, Spanish fino (sherry), and pints of black and tan, they are doing palmas, the driving chorus of hand-clapping, precisely patterned with accents and counter-rhythms, that accompanies flamenco song and dance.

"Don't rush it," Parker admonishes a student and demonstrates the proper execution of a two-beat pattern. "Remember, it marks the rhythm like a heart beat." Next to him, a striking blonde-haired flamenca named Nina Menendez, the daughter of sixties protest singer Barbara Dane, is sharing verses of a saucy, Jerez-style gypsy buleria (from the Spanish burlar, to jest, or make fun of):

Si te enamoras, si te enamoras  
no entregues el alma por qué te la roban  
If you fall in love, don't give away your soul  
Because they will rob you blind

She is answered by Patricia Velasquez, an intense, coffee-eyed Mexican painter everyone calls "the hyena" for her ear-splitting laugh:

Si quieres que yo te quiera ha de ser con condicion  
Que lo tuyo ha de ser mío y lo mío tuyo nó!

If you want me to love you, there is one condition  
That whatever is yours is mine  
And what is mine is not yours

Parker has turned off the mike and passes his guitar, (a handmade, 1953 de la Chica model with a french-polished body, ebony tuning pegs, and an intricate in-laid rosette around the sound hole) to another Berkeley flamenco, David Guthartz (aka David "the Turbo" Gutierrez). A taut, curly-haired guitarist, racing car enthusiast, and yoga instructor with whom Parker has played for many years, Turbo laughs at Parker's grousing about the neighbors who live above the "Tross," as habitues call it. They have complained again about the noise from the bar, and, in an intricately negotiated arrangement with the management, the flamencos of East Bay have been permitted to continue their regular Thursday night fiestas on condition that they move to another part of the room and turn off the amplification.

"It has nothing to do with the guitar," Parker insists – and in truth his playing even on mike is barely audible over the din of a party of law school students, competing scrabble, checkers, Trivial Pursuit addicts, and the heated dialectical arguments among a table of unreconstructed Berkeley Stalinists – "the neighbors just don't like flamenco."

Suddenly the Mexican singer's laughter rips across the room like screeching chalk. Parker, in a gesture of self-parody and collective send-up, leaps onto the table and begins improvising an absurd cante flamenco lyric about a pair of Havana gangsters, "Juani and Tani who wear suits made by Armani" plotting to smuggle Cuban cigars to a Spanish department store in Madrid called El Corte Ingles. He punctuates his raunchy Spanish singing with the heelwork of a charging bull, thigh-slapping rhythm, and opera buffa-like gestures of defiance at the ceiling separating him from the Tross's anti-flamenguista neighbors.

At the corner of the bar, Paul Shalmy, a former International Herald Tribune journalist and entertainment editor for Eye Magazine, is shaking his head with disdain as he commiserates with bartender Chris Parnell over their friend's flamenco burlesque. They laugh uproariously as Turbo hands back the guitar to Parker and salutes him as Berkeley's only singing kosher ham.

Shalmy is a long-time aficionado who spent twenty years living in Andalucía, flamenco's breeding ground. Parnell, the bartender, following a tradition of flamenco aliases, calls Shalmy "El Sabio" because of his extensive knowledge of the music. The Tross flamencos are a multi-cultural cast who come to dance, sing, play guitar, and banter. Fans of their informal juergas (jams) include Bay area musical luminaries like blues guitarist Mark Silber, singer Maria Muldaur, and classical guitarist Philip Rosheger, the first American to win the coveted Segovia competition. His guest performances at the Tross bring this otherwise irrepressible and irreverent crowd of flamencos to a hushed silence.

Tonight their antics have given way to bitchy, multilingual gossip about the Bay Area's rival flamenco clans – the self-described modern-style performers whom Parker calls the enemy for their use of cajons (wooden percussion boxes), ignorance of flamenco singing, bad manners, worse culinary tastes, etc., and the traditionalists who favor the kind of pueblo-style gypsy flamenco Parker plays.

From the bar, Shalmy begins talking up an event he is producing that has the East Bay flamenco scene abuzz: the arrival from Madrid of flamenco guitarist David Serva for what has been called an historic series of Bay Area concerts, workshops, and private fiestas beginning this week. Serva is widely regarded as one of the foremost interpreters of traditional gypsy flamenco. For many Spanish singers, Serva is a guitarist of choice when it comes to accompanying traditional flamenco song styles. And here in the East Bay, he has long been admired among aficionados and his many former students (including Parker) as a guitarist's guitarist.

To explain Serva's legendary status among East Bay flamencos, Shalmy tells the Tross bartender Parnell an emblematic anecdote. It concerns Serva's rather mysterious identity.

In Madrid, where he has performed for more than two decades, Serva, whose preferred vices are drinking beer and smoking Bajo Nicotina ("dark tobacco lites"), is talking with an American friend in Candela, a bar where flamencos in the Spanish capital repair after performances to gossip, swap falsetas (flamenco guitar riffs), and hold their own after-hours fiestas in a cave-like basement room downstairs. Candela, Shalmy tells us, is the favorite hangout for working and out-of-work flamencos because unlike many Spanish bars there are no signs saying "Se prohíbe el Cante" (singing is forbidden). In Spain as in Berkeley, the raucous antics and explosive singing of flamenco performers have their disapproving neighbors.

At the bar, a young gypsy guitar phenomenon named Jerónimo Maya listens with amazement as Serva converses. All his life, this young gitano (gypsy) has known Serva as "Tío (uncle) David" and has spoken with him in a Spanish flavored with caló, the dialect gitanos use among intimates. For Maya, Serva's distinctive southern Spanish drawl has always marked him as a native of Andalucía, the breeding ground for flamenco much as the Mississippi Delta was for country blues. After Serva's American friend leaves, Maya asks Serva, "Tío David, I didn't know you spoke English. Where did you learn to speak it?"

"Yo soy Americano de California," Serva replies, "I'm an American from California." Dumbfounded, the young gitano reports this to his father who for years has played with Serva in one of Madrid's leading tablaos (flamenco nightclubs), and on concert stages around the world.

"It is true," his father tells him. "And the way he plays guitar, nobody could ever tell he's a foreigner."

Indeed, few of his Spanish flamenco friends know that David Serva is really David Jones, the son of retired U.C. Berkeley Political Science Professor Victor Jones. His lineage is white Alabama not gypsy Andaluz. A graduate of Berkeley High, Jones left home at 15, played blues with local legend K.C. Douglas in a San Pablo avenue garage and folk music with his friends in cafes along Telegraph Avenue. A teenage runaway from the New England boarding school he briefly attended, Jones, according to his oldest friends, grew up fast from a shy, mumbling, bespectacled introvert who studied Latin (but who, to the amazement of his school chums, once beat up the local bully for terrorizing them), to become a streetwise, funkier California version of Holden Caulfield. He spent his 17th birthday in a Miami juvenile detention center, shortly before taking his first trip to Spain in 1959 to pursue his destiny as a flamenco guitarist. A star attraction in the flamenco room of San Francisco's Spaghetti Factory in its heyday in the sixties, Serva was also the stage guitarist for the Broadway musical, Man of La Mancha, and played in a Greenwich Village cafe only a few blocks from where Bob Dylan was strumming the ballad of Gypsy Davy (no relation). David Jones had become David Serva, a prodigal Berkeley native son who successfully assimilated himself seven thousand miles away from home into the closed, clannish, and exotic world of gypsy flamencos.

When I first met him in the Village in 1963, Serva, age 22, was an anomalous and slightly intimidating figure in the downtown world of hipsters, beat poets, jazz artists, and folkies who congregated in Washington Square -- not only for the formal cut of the black, three-piece he then sported but because he sang, convincingly, obscure cante flamenco to his own guitar accompaniment -- a feat few Spanish solo guitarists were bold enough to try on stage. In the Café Feenjon where I then worked, Serva smoked Gauloises and bantered with the disarming, worldly wit of a Humphrey Bogart gone native with the gypsies. One night at the Feenjon, I brought in a Ramirez guitar I had recently purchased and played him an embarrassing rendition of a buleria falseta I was trying to master. He listened patiently, suggested a better fingering, and kindly corrected my garbled compás (flamenco's complex beat and accent patterns).

Serva's music was compelling to me then because his performances were a far cry from the ruffled shirt, polka dot, castanet accoutrements of most stage flamenco. His playing style eschewed the fancy pyrotechnics of modern flamenco with its addiction to speedy, virtuosic finger work, and its predilection for jazzy, Brazilian chords, and melodies that popularized the music while making it sound more like it originated in Rio, Cap Antibes, or New York than the gypsy pueblos of Andalucía. Instead, he played with an emotional directness and simplicity rooted, I would learn, in an encyclopedic knowledge of cante flamenco and a mastery of the art's complex rhythms.

Then as now, Serva's guitar playing bucked the trends and fashions that rocked and revolutionized flamenco via international solo stars like Sabicas, Carlos Montoya, Manitas de Plata, and today's sensation, Paco de Lucía. Serva introduced down-home, pueblo style playing to audiences in San Francisco and New York through a darker, more Spartan, and deliberate toque (playing style), a sound flamenco aficionados describe as hondo meaning the more profound and authentic feeling celebrated by Spanish poet Federico García Lorca in his gypsy ballads and essays on flamenco's cante hondo (deep song). Serva learned and transmitted this style to a generation of Bay Area guitarists and flamenco artists who followed his quest for roots flamenco to one of its purist sources -- a small Andaluz pueblo outside Sevilla called Morón de La Frontera where Serva went in 1962 to study with gypsy maestro Diego el del Gastor (1908-1973).

Ten years after hearing him in Greenwich Village, I, too, followed the gypsy flamenco trail to Sevilla and Morón in 1973 where I first met Berkeley guitarists Guthartz and Parker. Like me, they had fallen under the spell of pueblo-style flamenco and had gone to study among gypsy artists for whom the music was an immediate expression of their daily lives and struggles. Many of them were butchers, field workers, and sheep shearers who disdained professional flamenco and performed only in the intimate settings of their pueblos at fiestas, weddings, and baptisms. They preserved authentic flamenco traditions, and for them, the singing, not solo guitar, was the heart of the music. Encountering those artists was a musical revelation that left many of us feeling we were hearing the flamenco equivalent of 1930s country blues legends Robert Johnson and Charlie Patton.

I lost track of my Berkeley flamenco friends when I returned to the East Coast to write and they, back to the East Bay, to pursue, more seriously than I, their careers as flamenco guitarists. Many years later, after moving to Berkeley, I wandered by accident into the Albatross and found them again at the forefront of what many call the most active flamenco scene outside of Spain. Over three decades, the ties linking a diverse California university town to the rural Andalusian backwater we had known as a Mecca for enthusiasts of traditional flamenco, had blossomed. And at the center of this odd cross-cultural exchange was the man Guthartz calls its "cultural liaison," David Serva.

"The idea," says Guthartz, "that someone from my neighborhood could do what he's done has always been inspirational. He has a certain cultural intelligence and adaptability that allowed him to fit in as foreigner in Spain, and a region, Andalucía, and beyond that, to the world of the gypsies...He's like a Margaret Mead in loincloth with a guitar."

Serva's Bay Area homecoming this week (it includes concerts at Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts on Saturday and here in Berkeley for two shows at La Peña on March 17th) will feature another flamenco icon. Along with his wife, the

dancer Clara Mora, he brings with him the legendary gypsy singer and dancer Miguel Funi for his West Coast debut. It is a measure of the respect Serva has earned among Spain's gypsy artists that he was able to entice Funi, who rarely leaves his native pueblo of Lebrija, to perform in Berkeley. Noted for his idiosyncratic, spontaneous, and intensely personal performance style, Funi comes from a distinguished family of pueblo flamenco artists with whom Serva has performed over the years both in Spain and around the world.

"Serva is the Godfather of the Berkeley scene," says Parker who has played at Sevilla's month-long Bienal de Arte Flamenco - the most distinguished international flamenco gathering - and will perform with Serva in the fin de fiesta number that will conclude each performance. "David was one of the absolute pioneers, and I respect him because he did this over thirty years ago when it wasn't easy, under Franco, when the bathrooms in Spain were dirty, and it wasn't so attractive to tourists. He's the one who has made the most inroads there and has influenced a whole bunch of people. He is living the dream or the nightmare as the case may be. It's a tremendous accomplishment. David is an artist who respects flamenco more than he likes himself."

Just how did David Jones transform himself into David Serva? Local screenwriter David Peoples has known him since 1946 when they both were faculty brats in grade school together.

"He always took everything to the limit," says Peoples. "The most extraordinary thing about David is that he has invented himself. He's an absolute creation of David Jones sculptor or whatever it is and in hindsight he was always a little that way. Even as a kid, he always took everything to extremes. We'd read James Fenimore Cooper novels and pretend we were trappers and the next thing you know Jonesy would show up on the back porch skinning a dead snake -- literally pulling its skin off. My mother was horrified, and I was in awe. He always took everything that couple of steps out there. He didn't stop."

Guitarist John Moore (aka Juan Moro) is a UC San Diego linguistics professor who lived in the Bay Area and has studied flamenco with Serva off and on for twenty-five years. He met his mentor in 1972, the last year Serva performed at the Spaghetti factory before moving to Spain for good. Moore, who at 19 followed Serva to Madrid, underscores the importance of Serva's adolescent wanderings in Andalucia to his musical formation.

"The problem for Americans in Spain," says Moore, "is the extent to which they can assimilate. Language is a barrier, being able to understand the nuances, the jokes. David went there early enough to learn the language. You learn it better the younger you are. He has a phenomenal ear, and it correlates with his musicality. That's why he can pass as a Spaniard or a gypsy."

Remarkably, Serva never studied Spanish formally, although he had studied French and Latin. He picked up what he calls his "street Spanish" on trips to Puerto Rico and Spain and then, from his love and long study of flamenco singing.

"I went to the singing right away," Serva told me from Madrid. "Actually a lot of my Spanish I learned from flamenco records that had words written out."

But the turning point in Serva's flamenco apprenticeship happened on his second trip to Spain, in 1962, a rite of passage at the age of twenty-one that took him to Morón de la Frontera where he first encountered gypsy guitarist Diego el del Gastor. Serva had heard of Diego from an expatriate American aficionado named Donn Pohren, the author of several books on flamenco, who briefly ran a flamenco cafe in San Francisco.

"Pohren invited me to go around Andalucia in a mule cart with a singer, Manolito el del María, a sheep shearer who lived with his family in a gypsy cave in Alcalá de Guadaira," Serva recalled. (Pohren's classic *The Art of Flamenco* begins with a description of one such donkey trek.) But when Serva arrived in Sevilla, Pohren was recovering from a kidney operation at his home and could not make the trip. Instead, he gave Serva some tapes of Diego and talked rhapsodically about the authentic flamenco scene in Morón where Pohren was then working at a nearby American military base.

"I listened to the tapes and went for it," said Serva. "It seemed like the way I wanted to go. And when Pohren got well enough to go out, we all went to Morón to this fiesta." It would be the first of many such gatherings with the maestro.

About an hour south of Sevilla, Morón de la Frontera is a rural Andalusian pueblo that overlooks a plain cultivated for olive groves, sunflowers, wheat, and livestock from the foothills of the Serrania de Ronda. Aside from the remains of a Moorish citadel, a cathedral, and a rather gawky monument to a gamecock, there is little to attract the tourist, unless you happen to be an aficionado of traditional flamenco. Historically Morón, the county seat of the neighboring pueblos, was a haven for outcasts and marginal elements of Andalusian society, bandits, smugglers, and gypsies. There, after centuries of frontier-like isolation,

the more settled Andaluz gitanos, called caseros, evolved a shtetl-like culture of their own, much of it centered around flamenco. During the 19th century, the region became a hotbed of Andalucian bandolerismo (banditry), a precursor of the Spanish anarchist movement, and every backwater like Morón had its own Robin Hood-like hero. A local proverb underscores its historical remoteness from the Spanish capital: mata el rey y vete a Morón (kill the king and go hide in Morón). A crossroads for traders between the provincial capital Sevilla, the perched village of Ronda, and Spain's southern-most Mediterranean coast, Morón was notorious at the turn of the century for its brothels, dozens of which lined a street near the cemetery called Pozo Loco (Street of the Crazy Well).

Born in March, 1908 in Arriate, Diego el del Gastor was the son of a gypsy sheep shearer who later became a successful corredor or horse trader, settling his family in Gastor, a village between Ronda and Morón. Like many gitanos, his father hid his all of his money in a large trunk. After his death, the family lost its fortune (some of it spent getting Diego out of Franco's fascist jails). After his father's death, Diego supported his family playing at local fiestas. He quickly gained a reputation as a master accompanist of cante flamenco. His idiosyncratic playing became known as the Morón style and was admired as one of the most original of flamenco's several regional styles in Andalucía. An eccentric who recited Lorca and wove snatches of Bach and Beethoven into his music, Diego, wearing his signature Andaluz-style gorra (cap), held court in Morón's main bar, Casa Pepe. To express his disdain for the Franco regime, he was fond of playing the Marseilles on the guitar, turning Casa Pepe into a scene from the movie Casablanca.

Recordings of him are scarce and prized, because Diego hated the artificiality of studios and, even more, the world of staged flamenco and night clubs. He rarely left Morón and survived from private fiestas organized by senioritos (a sometimes disparaging term for upper class Spaniards) and the lessons he gave to the gaggle of foreign disciples, many of them from the East Bay, who began flocking to Morón in the mid-sixties. David Serva was the first and most gifted of his many American pupils.

He met Diego in the summer of 1962 when Pohren brought him to play for the maestro at Casa Pepe. In Morón, Pohren told Serva, he would hear the real thing. A number of gypsy artists had gathered including Manolito el de la María, the singer Luis Joselero, and Diego's nephew, the singer/dancer Andorrano. After Diego played, he handed the guitar to Serva, asked him to take a turn, and then accompany Manolito. Pohren recorded the impromptu fiesta.

"Nobody seemed particularly pissed off at me," Serva recalled. "I kept the rhythm, and they liked how I played. I had already absorbed a lot of Diego from the tapes Pohren had given me in Sevilla," said Serva.

In that hour, Serva's affinity for Diego's playing echoed off the green-washed walls of Casa Pepe. In fact, Diego was blown away by the sylph-like, twenty-one year old blonde-haired Californian. How was it possible that a foreigner could play soleá and other flamenco songs so convincingly? To resolve the problem to his friends, Diego pointed to Serva's fingers.

"He's an American gypsy," Diego proclaimed. "You know how I can tell? Because his fingernails are red, not white." In a country where racial tensions spill over into the flamenco world, Spanish non-gypsy flamencos are sometimes viewed by gitanos as interlopers, just as, in America, some white jazz musicians have found their whiteness a hindrance in the jazz world. Serva's acceptance by the wizened flamencos of Casa Pepe -- his photo hung there for years in a corner of the bar -- was made easier back then because he was a foreigner.

"Diego was such a guru, man," said Serva of his teacher, "such a charismatic figure and so accessible. You know, the whole thing -- with all his dignity and patriarchal heritage. He was so friendly and so cultured and well-mannered."

Diego easily defied stock, romantic images of gypsies. Serva recalled standing outside a bar in Morón as a bunch of itinerant gypsy vendedores (trinket sellers) got off the bus to hock their wares. Diego turned to Serva and asked if he liked all the gypsy "cosas" (paraphernalia).

"¿Qué cosas?" Serva asked (What things?).

"Polka dot shirts, scarves, pork-pie hats, and sideburns -- all that stuff," said Diego.

"I mumbled a 'yes,' and Diego said in his most guttural voice: 'Lo odio!' ('I despise it!'). The stereotypical gypsy thing was anathema to him."

Morón's gitanos defied many preconceptions and were full of quirky, unpredictable behavior. Serva recalled a Morón gypsy named Suárez, a relative of singer Miguel Funi, inviting him to dinner.

"Suárez looked like an Egyptian prince and had once played an American Indian in a spaghetti western that was filmed in

Spain. He said 'you're the only gadjo (non-gypsy) I've ever invited to my house.' I thanked him for the honor. He told me the reason: 'you never look at gypsy women.'"

"I felt at home in Andalucia," said Serva, "the way people were, their courtesy, and dignity. Maybe because both of my parents are from Alabama...It was the courtesy I was brought up with. That Byzantine way of handling things seemed very natural to me. They have formalized kinds of behavior. My daddy never said 'hi,' he said 'how do you do.' He never said 'what?'; he said 'I beg your pardon.' I like all those old-timey phrases."

Serva's musical immersion in Morón began that summer with weekly lessons with Diego at Casa Pepe.

"For me, the Morón sound is about a certain aesthetic," says Serva. "It's the opposite of what modern flamenco does where you use rubato to schmaltz it up. The toque of Morón involves a different concept of rhythm. I mean, Diego had perfect, metronome-like rhythm. It's straight and precise, with every half beat right in the middle. The modern style is more lyrical. They slow down. They speed up. That's very un-Morón. Part of what I consider my facility with accompaniment comes from the fact that I like rhythm. Everything has to fit in."

By the end of his first summer in Morón, Serva had run out of money and hitchhiked to the south of France to hook-up with his close friend from Berkeley High, Paul Shalmy. Serva was broke when he arrived on the French Riviera in the chic seaside town of Villefranche-sur-Mer. He was eager to go home to Berkeley and earn money to get back to Spain.

"David had been completely Diego-ized and starting playing me all these falsetas (flamenco riffs) he had learned in Morón," says Shalmy. "It was a super-Gypsy sound, and different from anything I had ever heard him play before. He was raving about Diego, Manolito, Joselero, and his adventures in Casa Pepe. It was unreal how unbelievably quick David was at absorbing this new style."

To earn his return airfare to California, Serva went to a strip of waterfront restaurants where a lot of street performers were busking for tips. Among a ragtag assortment of clowns, circus acts, and fire eaters, Serva took out his guitar, and Shalmy passed the hat. French poet Jean Cocteau ate there, but he never gave them any money. David told Shalmy why: Cocteau had been hustled and ripped off by a French gypsy flamenco superstar, Manitas de Plata!

Serva returned to the Bay Area and resumed his gig at Los Flamencos de la Bodega, the highly successful Spanish music room of San Francisco's Spaghetti Factory. He'd been a regular there from the time sculptor Richard Whalen opened it on Pearl Harbor day in December, 1959. Back then, Serva would hitch hike over to North Beach from Berkeley, and he and guitarist Fred Mejia helped set it up, painting the walls, hanging bottles and lanterns to decorate the place. Bolinas sculptor Ron Garrigues hung chairs.

Whalen, whose grandmother had been a vaudeville queen on the RKO Orpheum circuit, had an instinctive flare for show business, and throughout its twenty-six year run, Los Flamencos de la Bodega remained one of the most popular scenes in North Beach. Serva calls his friend Whalen the "Father Flanigan" of the Bay Area flamenco scene. He employed, counseled, befriended a host of aspiring flamenco artists, some of them street kids and runaways, in how to behave, dress, and play to the crowd. A flamboyant, New York-born artist and political activist in liberal causes, Whalen was the in loco parentis ("emphasis on loco," Whalen quips) to the burgeoning Bay Area flamenco scene.

At his North Beach apartment, surrounded by memorabilia, the Factory's flamenco impresario showed me an archive of photos. The Bill Graham of North Beach recalled Serva's beginnings as a shy, mumblor who wore cowboy boots, a Stetson hat, and dark shades. Like many of the young flamencos Whalen groomed, Serva lacked stage skills.

"I like a good show," said Whalen, "but not a psychodrama and, for me, you've failed if everybody doesn't want to fuck you after a performance. When I think of great entertainers, I think of Presley or Ike and Tina Turner. At the Spaghetti Factory, quite frankly, the personalities were far more interesting than flamenco itself. In the same way, I love opera singers but I hate opera. And cuadro flamenco (stage flamenco with singers and dancers) is a bit like a small opera, only mercifully brief. Modern flamenco loses a great deal in big concert hall settings. It gets diluted. It loses the intimacy and sense of immediacy. And that's what I wanted to get across in our shows."

Serva's aloof persona notwithstanding, something immediately struck Whalen: "He had a voice that could wake the dead. It was stunning to hear that erupt on stage. David had a gift for cante. He was the only foreigner who grasped it and could handle Andaluz. When I heard him, a bell within me rang."

Whalen's showmanship brought flamenco to the streets of North Beach with a flamencomobile full of dancers and singers performing on a truck bed (shades of Father Flanigan's St. Patrick's Day parade in New York City).. He enlisted them in fundraisers for democratic party causes, arts organizations like the Actors Workshop, and even Smothers Brothers' comedian Pat Paulson's parodic run for the Presidency.

Whalen's show was a training ground for a number of Bay Area flamencos. "The Spaghetti Factory," says Berkeley guitarist David Guthartz who played there with Kenny Parker in the early 80's, "was the longest running soap opera in the history of ethnic music. Despite what Richard says, he thrived on its back stage melodramas and antics. He was famous for pairing people on stage who fueded with one another as soon as the show was over."

Among its more volatile performers was the late dancer Myrna Williams (aka Isa Mura) whose daughter Yaelisa now runs the Bay Area troupe Caminos Flamencos. A former USO performer, Mura once became so enraged at her guitarist and lover that she threw a stiletto-heeled shoe at him. It dented his forehead as well as the relationship.

High-wire personalities and aliases were never in short supply in the flamenco room. Serva was not the first of these flamencos to adopt a stage name, but many certainly followed the fashion.

"It was obvious that Jones wouldn't work in Spanish," he said "for one thing it has an obscene connotation. Since Serva was the gypsy word for Sevilla, I thought that would be a cool to have a last name in caló. So I adopted it sometime in my late teens. But it had nothing to do with anything and when I found out how ridiculous I could be, I decided to keep it to remind myself how stupid it was."

At the Spaghetti Factory, Serva's infusion of Morón, gypsy-style guitar inspired some intriguing multi-cultural exchanges. Not only did many of the Factory's flamencos follow in his footsteps to Morón and other gypsy pueblos in Andalucía; the artistic mentors they found there soon made their way back to the Bay Area to perform and teach. They included Diego's nephews, singer/guitarist Augustín Ríos Amaya, who moved here twenty five years ago and currently teaches flamenco in his Oakland studio; guitarist Dieguito Torres Amaya; guitarist/singer Juan del Gastor, who visits regularly from Sevilla for concerts and master classes, and the singer/dancer Anzonini del Puerto -- all of them gypsies who made friends with the East Bay flamencos.

The Morón-East Bay circuit fostered the serious and the absurd. One night a group of Berkeley aficionados brought Anzonini to hear Ray Charles sing at a club on Shattuck. After hearing a gritty and soulful bit of blues, Anzonini leapt to his feet and blurted out "Qué fenómeno! Canta gitano! Canta gitano!" (Phenomenal - he sings gypsy! He sings gypsy style!) For its part, in Morón, from the mid-60s on, the sudden influx of hippy guitarists and their girlfriends had predictable outcomes -- like the strange visitation of a nude, pony-tailed, flute player tripping his brains out on the ramparts of Morón's Moorish castle.

Apart from Donn Pohren, the only Americans who had frequented Morón before the early sixties were servicemen from the U.S. Air Force base. Soon after he'd brought Serva to meet Diego, Pohren purchased a small finca (farmhouse) outside the village from an expatriate bohemian American painter named Judith Deim. Pohren's Finca Espartero hosted many late-night Morón fiestas at which Diego and his clan performed. Until it was sold in the mid-seventies, it operated as Morón's Flamenco dude ranch. For those foreigners unwilling to rough it in town at Fonda Pasqual, the pension where Diego lived and Americans rented rooms adjoining a pig pen, the Finca offered Morón's most upscale digs.

The Moron-East Bay connection spawned its archivist and memorialist as well -- Oakland guitarist Evan Harrar.

"I owe my involvement with flamenco to junk mail," says Harrar who runs a website devoted to [Diego del Gastor](#). "My senior year in college I ordered this boxed set of Manitas de Plata from a record club and got the bug."

Harrar was in Paris in the winter of 1967 when he ran into an American Diego-phile named Charles Jackson (the streaking flute player of Castle Moron). And when an antique buying scheme in Nepal and India failed to pan out, Harrar, who knew only a handful of Spanish phrases, packed his guitar and headed for Morón. It would be the first of four such trips he took there in the seventies as he became Diego's disciple. In those days, he recalled, lessons with Diego cost 250 pesetas or four US dollars, and a glass of tinto (red wine) at Casa Pepe, five cents.

"Two friends had bought this country house for Diego from proceeds they won in the lottery," said Harrar "and he rented it to

me for about 2000 pesetas. There was no water or electricity, just a fireplace and bed. We had a lot of candlelight fiestas out there. In Morón, everyday was like the first day you were there. In America, most relationships seem like they're set up to hold people in prison. Over there, you could be whatever you wanted to be. It gave me enormous freedom."

Harrar took lessons with Diego and subsequently transcribed dozens of the maestro's falsetas and compás-patterns which he uses in his guitar classes and plays on Thursday nights when he sometimes joins in the fiestas at the Albatross. But Harrar's transcriptions of Diego's falsetas were unusual in the sense that flamenco, until quite recently, has been an entirely oral tradition. Many of its greatest artists read no music, and transmission from master-to-pupil was done without tape recorders, videos, or notation. A kind of possessive memory operates in the flamenco world as followers of one maestro, regional style or another adhere to claims of purismo or purity of tradition. Analogies can be found in the blues and other traditional music, but with flamenco the phenomenon spawned a division between "moderns" and "purists." It is a long standing and, despite its rhetoric, creative debate with Morón very much at the center of the fray.

"The first revolution -- I mean the people who laid the ground work for modern solo flamenco guitar -- Ramon Montoya, Niño Ricardo, and Sabicas - Morón sorta skipped that," says Serva. "There was a definite school of guitar that existed before Montoya, and Morón continued that and innovated with it. Diego used to say: *habia un gitano de Madrid que tocaba la guitarra que decian Ramon Montoya y tocaba la guitarra mas gacho que nadie gitano.* (There was a gypsy from Madrid who played the guitar, and he played the guitar more non-gypsy than anyone.)

"But there was something even more important," Serva continued. "In Morón you were dealing with music that was not oriented towards theater or public performances. It was done by people who did it for themselves. Other people were allowed to participate by listening, but it wasn't done to impress them, it was done to impress the people who performed. Those two basic things were crucial both to the quality and the intention of the music that happened there."

For Serva, the influence of Diego's playing on his own work had never been a matter of playing his falsetas note-for-note or in slavish imitation of his style. "I've always been making up my own stuff," says Serva. "I'd play two chords of tarantas and start making up a falseta. I'll hear other guitarists, and I may like somebody else's stuff but I've always done my own variations." By the early 1970s, he was already creating a more "modern" sound in his solo playing, albeit one grounded in his own synthesis of Diego's style.

"I'm a classical in the flamenco sense," he once told a Madrid radio interviewer, "but I don't think I've lagged behind. A little to the side, but not behind."

Serva began playing clubs in Madrid and Marbella in the early 70s, while pursuing a career internationally as a soloist. Although he still believes singing is "the quintessential element of Flamenco," his solo performances evolved beyond the Morón style as is evident from his CD *Son Gitano en America* (*Gypsy Sound in America*), recorded at a live concert in Toronto. Woven into the fabric of his renderings of traditional flamenco forms are musical quotations from Thelonious Monk and Miles Davis. The compositions recall Keith Jarrett's improvisations with Gospel, classical and Middle themes in his solo concerts. But even with these lyrical evocations, the spirit of Morón is never far away.

Serva's artistic evolution beyond the Morón style was sparked and shadowed in part by a phone call he received from Kenny Parker on July 7th, 1973. Parker had driven from Lebrija on a sweltering day for the Gazpacho, Morón's flamenco festival where Diego was set to play. It was an especially important event for Diego because that year's Gazpacho was set to honor two sister singers he had long accompanied, La Fernanda y La Bernarda de Utrera. Diego had thrown himself into organizing the event and wanted everything to be perfect. Everyone who mattered had to be there. He had even dispatched Paul Shalmy to Marbella to bring the gypsy singer Anzonini up for it.

A little before 1pm, Parker wandered into Casa Pepe and found the maestro at the bar. He bought him a tinto. Diego, in turn, invited him to a private fiesta he was hosting at his country house on the outskirts of town. Parker was delighted and asked Diego to join him in a game of pinball. But a nephew, Pepe Flores, arrived to drive Diego to the house and get it ready for the evening's party.

Parker watched them drive away when Diego all of sudden the doors of the car flew open, and Pepe started waving his hands frantically. It was about 107 degrees outside, and Diego had collapsed. They got him some water, picked him up, and carried him across the Plaza to Pepe's house to rest. He looked awful. There weren't any doctors around so they called the town nurse. She looked at him and said, "well he looks ok, let him rest, and if he's all right tonight he can play." For much of the year, Diego had suffered from spells of dizziness, and everyone thought he had collapsed from the heat.

"I didn't realize then," said Parker, "that I'd probably bought him the last glass of wine that he drank on earth."

Later that afternoon, Parker returned to Casa Pepe and learned that after taking a rest, Diego had walked up a hill to his sister's house and passed out in the street with a fatal heart attack.

"I called Marbella and left a message at David's apartment building."

Serva arrived early Sunday morning and with Parker and Shalmy watched Diego's nephews carry a simple, wooden casket past La Fonda Pasqual. The cries of his sisters and nieces rang like the keening of North African women, through the streets. For Parker and others, Morón was over.

A week after Diego's death a group of us gathered for a small fiesta at a small country venta (inn) outside La Puebla de Cazalla. The night before the village had hosted a large Reunion de Cante Hondo in the open plaza that had gone from 11 until dawn. The artists who performed that night were primed and one of the dancers, Manuela Carrasco, kicked her shoes into the crowd as she danced a bulería.

At the venta, Miguel Funi arrived and began singing on the patio where we'd gathered around table set with food and wine. A gypsy guitarist exclaimed that he loved flamenco so much he wanted to eat his guitar and promptly spread his jaws over the curve of its lower body. A drunken man appeared from the back of the inn, searching for the bathroom and stumbled across the table dumping garlic-soaked sausages, wine, and bread in the direction of Funi, entirely clad in white. Without missing a word of the soleá he was singing, he leapt back from the table as its contents crashed to the ground and shot a look of contempt so withering that the drunkard seemed to fall into the earth and disappear forever.

Not a spot of wine besmirched this gypsy in white who now lifted his scarf with such elegance and delight as he danced with abandon in the morning sun. I stared at the long road that stretched from the venta into the Serrania de Ronda, bounded on either side with olive groves as gnarled and ancient as the songs that echoed in the air. If I walked into the mountains I knew I would never come back.

The brilliant light had turned the earth terracotta red, and I remembered some flamenco verses memorializing the journey the gypsies had traveled from India to Armenia and Central Europe, from Egypt to North Africa and Andalucía, during their long diaspora:

I was a stone and lost my center  
And they threw me in the sea  
After a long time  
I once again found my soul

I want to go back to the mountains  
The mountains of Armenia  
Where nobody knows me  
When no one knows my name

END

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