

The music world is full of all kinds of cross-pollinated mixes... fusions or nouveau they are called. And it's often very unclear where some form of music falls. A look at the music categories in a typical CD store shows that even the music outlets, let alone the public, do not know the difference between the nouveau styles and the real thing. When it comes to flamenco, it's likely to be in the jazz, latin, international, or classical guitar sections. And even if they have a flamenco section, you might find Strunz and Farah (Latin Pop), Andres Segovia (Classical Guitar), Bola Sete (Brazilian jazz), or Django Reinhardt (jazz manouche) thrown into the mix. In today's ethnic-conscious music world, "Latin" and "Flamenco" have become buzz words. The problem is that they are definitely not synonymous, and in fact, are unrelated by any standard except the common language - Spanish.

First of all, flamenco should not be classified as 'Latin' music. Latin music today usually refers to salsa, merengue, and other tropical or afro-cuban forms. These musical forms are danceable by the general public, and the songs are singable by the general public. In this sense, they are a form of pop, and thoroughly Western. Flamenco, by contrast, is Indo-European if it is anything, derived from East Indian/Arabic/Spanish and Spanish Gypsy roots. Flamenco is not danceable or playable by the general public. It requires extensive training, even at an elementary level. The singing is a form of chant rather than song, and even in the flamenco community, not everyone can do it. Flamenco music is thoroughly Eastern.

Flamenco is more than a musical form; it is also a culture. Any competent guitarist can learn the notes of a flamenco piece from some written transcription, but flamenco is not found in the written notes, and odds are that the guitarist will not play the piece properly. Flamenco guitar requires very specialized technique, and even most classical guitarists do not interpret written flamenco transcriptions correctly. This is certainly not due to a lack of competence, but rather to a lack of proper exposure to flamenco guitarists and the flamenco world. Learning and performing flamenco requires an intense communication between the guitarists, singers (the cante), and dancers (the baile). And it is here that the crux of the matter lies. A so-called 'flamenco' guitarist who does not know how to play for a flamenco singer and dancer is missing the most important and essential part of his education. Asked about the importance of accompanying singing or dancing in the development of a guitarist, Paco de Lucia replied, "I think that it's very important that you like the cante - that you know it and understand it. And the dance, too. The secret of the flamenco language - its message - is in the cante. And in the rhythm of the dance, like the rhythm of the dance for the rasgueado. All of this is stuff that a soloist needs to have absorbed before becoming a soloist. You can't start out as a soloist or you'll always be missing something." 1.

To really be a flamenco, you need to become part of the flamenco subculture, a very exclusive and tiny world. You need to absorb the workings of the guitar, the baile, and the cante. This doesn't mean that you need to learn to dance to play flamenco guitar. But you still need to study with the dancer, with the

singer, and only when you know what they are doing will you know what you are doing. The same applies to the dancers and singers.

This brings up another major difference between flamenco and the Latin music world. When a salsa band plays, almost everyone can dance to it. People simply dance to whatever the band plays, and the band just plays their arrangement, with no necessary attention paid to the dancers. It makes no difference at all whether the people are even dancing the same way or not, and certainly technique is not an issue.

In a flamenco group, however, the singers and dancers are the focus of attention, and the musicians must follow or accompany them. If the dancer suddenly changes tempo or rhythm, the musicians must follow. If the singer shifts to a new tonality, the musicians must be aware of it and change accordingly. This adds a certain kind of improvisation to the performance.

There is one rhythm which lies on the flamenco/pop border, and is used by some Latin guitar stylists as the basis for their music. It is the rumba, which originally came into flamenco via Cuba. So the rumba can be considered a derivation from a Latin source, if you want to get technical. Even so, it is only one rhythm among the 20 or so distinct flamenco styles, and is quite a simple rhythm at that. At best, these Latin pop performers might be called 'rumberos,' who, like the Gypsy Kings, play rumbas almost exclusively. A guitarist or singer who only knows the rumba form will not have much of a career in the flamenco world. Today's flamencos must be complete.

Flamenco has been around in its present form since around the 1840s and really started to become noticed by the public around the 1890s, when jazz was getting off the ground in the USA. It has probably evolved faster than any other art form and is so multicultural, it is probably the first true world art. Maybe it's time for the public, as well as musicians, to appreciate this fascinating musical style better.

1 Acoustic Guitar April 1998