

We live in a world that is full of musicians of diverse musical styles collaborating to produce new sounds, new ways of expressing themselves. This has always happened in the flamenco and jazz worlds. The flamenco guitarist Sabicas recorded with a jazz saxophonist in the 30s. Carlos Montoya recorded with a jazz quartet in the 50s. Paco de Lucia recorded and toured with jazz guitarists John McLaughlin and Al Di Meola. Today, many flamencos perform with jazz musicians, and jazz pianist Michel Camilo and flamenco guitarist Tomatito won a Grammy for their collaboration CD 'Spain. Flamenco and jazz do seem to have an affinity for each other.

In the animal kingdom, two entirely unrelated species, say fish and whales, may seem to be related at first glance. They look and behave in similar ways. But this apparent sameness is only the result of their evolving in similar environments. This is the situation with flamenco and jazz. Both musical styles began as a form of expression of an oppressed people. In Spain, Gypsies were the persecuted people and their music formed the basis of early flamenco. Blacks in the US had a similar fate, and jazz grew out of their experiences. Flamenco purists claimed that you had to be a Gypsy to do flamenco. Then many non-Gypsies got involved, and so 'Gypsy' was changed to 'Spaniard.'" But now there are excellent professional flamenco performers all over the world. Similarly, you don't have to be Black or American to play jazz.

Both jazz and flamenco have improvisational traditions. When flamenco artists perform, there is a basic set of unwritten rules that everyone knows. A 'minimal' group, for instance, would have a singer, a dancer, a guitarist, and some form of percussion. The percussion may be a dancer doing 'palmas,' (handclapping), playing castanets, or it may be a cajón', the box drum. The musicians follow the dancer rhythmically and the singer tonally. The typical order is singer, dancer, guitarist, percussionist. Everyone gets a chance to take the lead and show off their skill when it is their turn. This is reminiscent of a jazz quartet in the so-called Chicago jazz style, where the piano takes the lead, followed by the guitar, bass, and drums.

So how does it work? Why are these musicians, flamenco or jazz, able to sit down and produce a good performance, often with people they have never worked or even rehearsed, with? The answer is simply that each form has a basic repertoire that is known to everyone in the community. All jazz people are familiar with a large body of songs and themes that you must know to be considered competent in the style. Flamenco consists of some 20 distinct rhythmical and musical styles, and to be considered a competent flamenco, you must know the ropes. Also, both flamenco and jazz aim to make new variations on the themes. At one time in both arts, copying a 'maestro,' was a sign of a certain level of competence. Sounding like saxophonist Charlie Parker or flamenco guitarist Niño Ricardo was an achievement. It still is. But it is no longer enough. The artist must be creative and this 'propio sello,' (individual stamp) is necessary more than ever.

It is the flamenco guitarist Paco de Lucia who has done the most to connect to the jazz world. His technical skill makes him one of the most awesome guitarists of any style, ever! His music has enriched

the works of jazz greats, such as Chick Corea and John McLaughlin, while he has been influenced by their work. He has led a whole new generation of flamencos into a new flamenco vocabulary, adding jazz chords and harmonies to the repertoire.

Because of these collaborations and innovations, some purists might claim that flamenco has become too much like jazz. Paco, they claim, no longer plays flamenco because he has added flute, sax and bass to his group. Other performers have added violin, piano, cello, and drum sets. What the purists miss is that flamenco has always evolved by absorbing musical elements from diverse cultures that it came into contact with. The rhythmic dance components can be traced to northern India Kathak dance. The singing style evolved from Arabic chants, while the flamenco guitar style took much from the oud. In this century, flamenco guitarist Ramón Montoya added classical guitar techniques to the repertoire. Even the RiverDance show incorporated flamenco into its Irish program. This isn't as unusual as it seems. Northern Spain is very Celtic and even has its own form of bagpipe.

Certainly, a flamenco guitarist playing with jazz musicians doesn't make him a jazz guitarist, any more than a jazz guitarist playing a rumba makes him a flamenco guitarist. Flamenco requires years of being immersed in the flamenco world to learn the trade. The same can be said of jazz. And when musicians from these worlds come together, something magical can happen. Both parties can come away enriched, and perhaps, more importantly, have some fun.