

iQué Pasa!

Flamenco de la Isla Society Newsletter

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Semana Santa in Jerez*

by Norah Garyali

For anyone who loves flamenco, in particular the *cante jondo*, with its deep and powerful emotional call, *Semana Santa* – the Holy Week celebration of Easter – in Jerez de la Frontera, is a unique opportunity to experience the heart and soul of flamenco as a living expression of the community.

Semana Santa celebrations showcase flamenco as prayer, sung from the balconies and heard across the city. Through music and pageantry, people of all ages bring to life the joy and sorrow of the Easter story.

At the mention of *Semana Santa*, people will often hurry to point out that they're not Catholic -- or, they merely meet the topic with polite or questioning looks. I am not Catholic myself – in fact, I do not belong to a particular religious tradition. However, I find religious festivals fascinating, because they offer glimpses into the soul of a culture through music and art in an atmosphere of communal celebration.

When it came to *Semana Santa* in Jerez, I knew that, above all, I wanted to hear the *saetas* – the songs sung from balconies or spontaneously on the street without guitar or any accompaniment, bringing processions and passing crowds to a stop.

In Spanish, the word *saeta* means "arrow," and the *cante* it defines couldn't be more aptly named: It pierces the heart with its power and emotion. Many *saetas* are short verses in a *siguriya* or *martinete* form, contemplative of the suffering and death of Jesus.

Other than that, I simply didn't know what to expect. And nothing could have prepared me for what I saw when I arrived on Tuesday of Holy Week.

There was an intense energy charging the whole city. The Plaza Arenal was alive with a festive carnival atmosphere, pulsing with music. The vitality and spirit were electrifying, the intensity on everyone's faces, truly memorable. There were children with drums and horns, stalls selling toys and candies, and streams of people moving with ease through and around processions – it amazed me how everyone seemed to know how to keep the flow moving.



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***Due to space limitations, this is a summarized article. If you'd like to read the whole piece, please email Amity at: amitys@shaw.ca**

Flamenco de la Isla 1

Semana Santa

(continued)

Every bar, café and restaurant was packed. Through the crowds I could see the orders of penitents with their different-coloured, pointed hoods visible above the crowd. Behind them, the brass bands and elaborate ornamental floats just kept on coming.

I wondered if I'd actually get to hear any *saetas*.

"They are spontaneous," the lady at the tourist bureau shrugged. "They can happen anywhere, at any time."

Luckily, the locals were a bit more help.

I aimed for the Wednesday procession of *El Prendimiento* from the Church of Santiago in one of the main gypsy districts -- I had been told that the best *saetas* happened along the Calle Ancha, especially when the procession returned to the church.

Eagerly, I looked out my window early Wednesday morning...

It was pouring rain.

When I walked out, the streets were deserted. I had never seen Jerez so empty and closed. A subdued, depressed atmosphere settled over the town. TV images were full of people crying. Understandable: During *Semana Santa*, continuous processions take place every day. The immense floats with images of Jesus and the Virgin are carried by about 30 men in a well-practiced choreography that maneuvers through the narrow streets, lifting and lowering them to avoid obstacles. Now the rain had ruined their hours of practice and anticipation.

Thursday morning dawned ominously with some light rain and it remained touch-and-go throughout the day, until the sun shone brightly in the late afternoon, bringing the whole town back to life -- a good thing, too, because Thursday before Good Friday is a highlight of the festival.

The processions, silent this time, go on all through the night and until the early hours of the morning. I decided to get a little rest before venturing outside, but was awoken by the sound of people on the street below.

The town was very much awake -- there were even more food stalls than in the daytime. Cafés and bars were all open, but there was no sign of drunkenness or rowdiness (with the exception of a slightly tipsy *bulería* from a well-meaning soul).

Here was a town with a deep rooted tradition, with an unwritten code of behaviour that is still largely respected by all ages. People were well-dressed, on this day in black, and courteous and welcoming of outsiders -- I myself was invited to get closer if I wanted to see better and

welcomed to join one group or another.

The floats were most visually stunning at night. Lit by hundreds of candles, they appear as flaming chariots moving through the darkness with their precious cargo. For me, this was the most impressive time to hear the *saetas*.

I caught up with one silent procession followed by a large, quiet crowd of people, and decided to join it on its journey back to the Church of San Miguel. We had not gone far when a man



Semana Santa

(continued)

stepped out in front of the image of Jesus and sang two very moving songs. Everyone stopped and there was silence when he finished -- no clapping or *jaleo*, as there usually is at the end of a *saeta*. He stepped back and the procession moved on.

Ingrained in my memory are the *saetas* sung from a balcony across from the Church of San Miguel, and the image of the crucified Christ entering the church. I can see the image turning in the candle light with the head dropped to one side. The songs emerging out of silence and disappearing back into the silence were striking.

On Good Friday, the procession of *El Cristo de la Expiración* passed in front of the Hotel Nuevo, with *saetas* sung a little further up the street on Calle Ramón de la Cala.

Just for Fun -- Flamenco Wordplay

The Washington Post asked readers to take any word from the dictionary, alter it by adding, subtracting, or changing one letter, and supply a new definition, for example:

Giraffiti (n): Vandalism spray-painted very, very high.

Sarchasm (n): The gulf between the author of sarcastic wit and the person who doesn't get it.

Along similar lines, Ian Browning has come up with the following alternative flamenco glossary. Enjoy!

Compás Heap(n): Place where all the missed accents and extra beats go to be recycled into rock music.

Flamencop(n): Someone (mentioning no names) who is on your case about your arm/leg/foot/head/little-finger/belly-button/etc not being the correct position/time/style/etc.

Gulpe(v): The funny feeling of tightness in your throat just before getting on stage.

Reversal(n): A practice for a performance where you feel less confident afterwards than before.

Pale-o(n): Spanish term for 'suntan-challenged' people trying to dance flamenco.

Rashgueado(n): A painful skin condition caused by playing the guitar too fast.

Soulearis(n): A funky version of *soleares* usually performed by four black guys in white suits.

Tarantulas(n): A flamenco rhythm that needs eight legs to dance and eight fingers on each hand to play (not performed very often).

Toque (n): Traditional headgear of Canadian flamenco guitarists (also see Capo).

'y'(p): Pronounced "ee." An instruction to begin (as in 'and...'). Also pronounced "why," as in "why are my feet not doing what my brain is commanding?"

Zembra(n): Mythical animal of southern Spain characterized by a striped appearance and a mating ritual involving rhythmic stamping of hooves.

Certain memories stand out. Particularly wonderful was a square so tightly packed that I thought, "Finally, we really are trapped." Everyone was listening to a group of palmeras, a guitar, piano and violin playing a joyous festive *bulería* as the procession passed through.

My final evening ended with a *cante* call-and-answer from one balcony to another, and at times together, one voice down the street and others further along.

Words are not enough to describe this whole unforgettable experience. This is not a tourist show but a real community celebration. To get the most of it, one has to participate.

I learned that if an image is worth a thousand words, coupled with a *saeta*, it is far more powerful. It penetrates the emotional core, moving the whole mind, not just the rational part. It represents the power of art to communicate and move, to keep alive memory and tradition.

Flamenco de la Isla Society

Membership Form

To renew or apply for a new membership, please fill in the information below and mail to:

2560 Vancouver Street, Victoria, B.C., V8T 4A7

Name: _____

Address: _____

Home Phone: _____ Work Phone: _____ Fax: _____

Email: _____

Amount enclosed: \$20 Individual Annual
 \$40 Family Annual

For further details, visit www.almadeespana.com or call Dale Hunter at 250 380-3927
(please make cheques or money orders payable to Flamenco de la Isla Society)

Thank you for supporting the art of flamenco!

Alma de España Flamenco Student Showcase

Students from beginner to advanced come together for a unique evening of flamenco music and dance.

Saturday, June 27, 2009
Spectrum Community Theatre
957 Burnside Road West
Victoria, B.C.
8:00 p.m. (doors 7:30)
General seating

Tickets: \$15 general, \$12 Society members
For information and tickets call 250-384-8832.

There are many other exciting shows in the works!

For a full list, visit: www.almadeespana.com

Website News

Remember you can now find us on the web at www.flamencodelaisla.org

There are new features available in our Members Only section. To gain access, go to the Member's Login page and enter "member" as your user id, and "solea" as your password. You'll be able to view and download the current issue of *¡Qué Pasa!* and an up-to-date list of items available from our Flamenco DVD Library.

If you have any questions, email us at info@flamencodelaisla.org

19th Annual Flamenco

Summer Workshop

August 3-7, 2009

with guest instructor **Carmen Romero**
For details, and for information on July and August technique classes, flamenco bootcamp and summer performances, please visit www.almadeespana.com

Society Board of Directors

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Questions? Ideas? Suggestions?

¡Qué Pasa! is a co-operative effort!

Submit flamenco-related stories, adventures or recipes (400 words max.) to Gloria, newsletter editor, at moonglowitch@yahoo.com
(please write 'newsletter submission' in the subject line)
We'd love to hear from you!