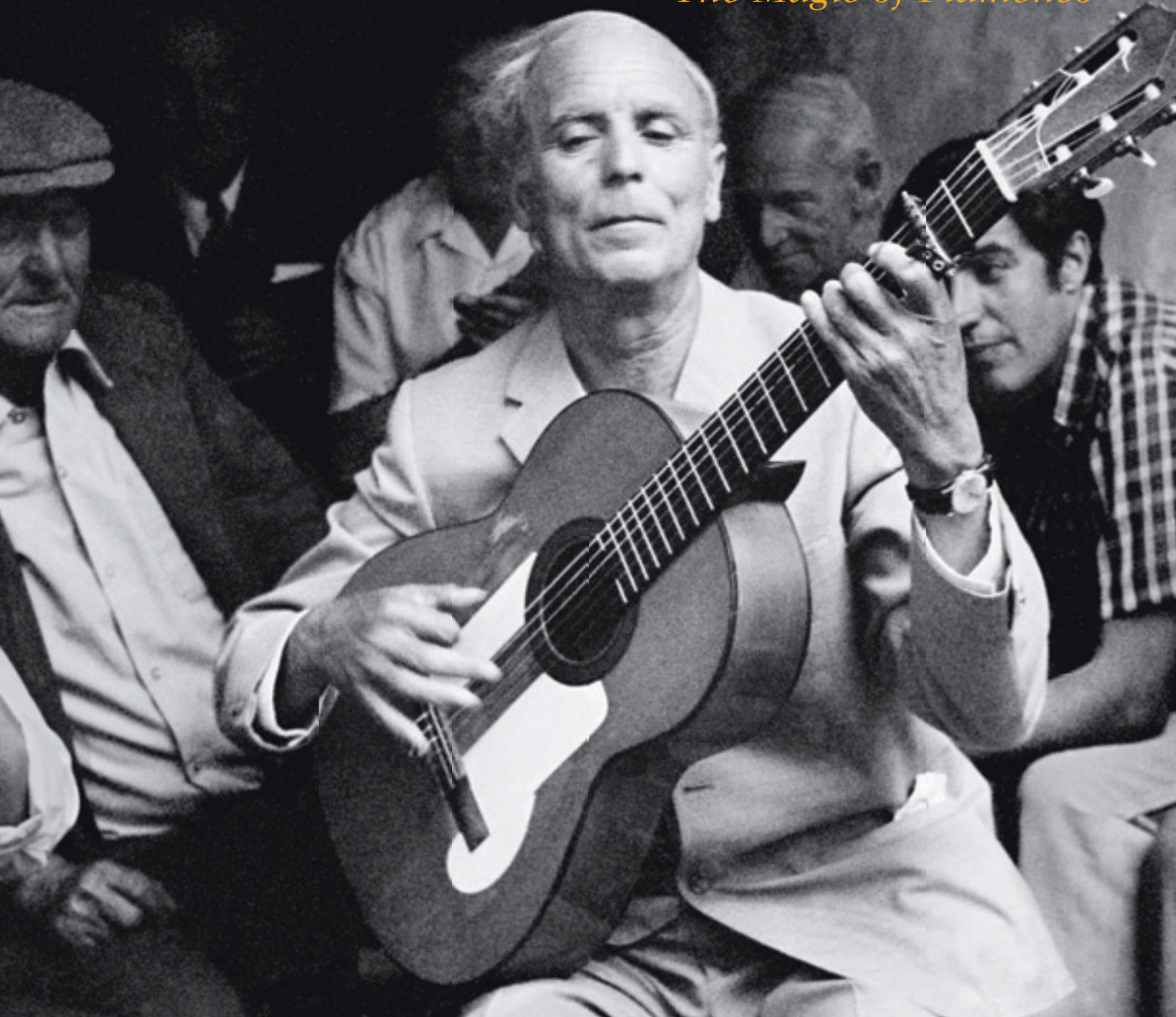


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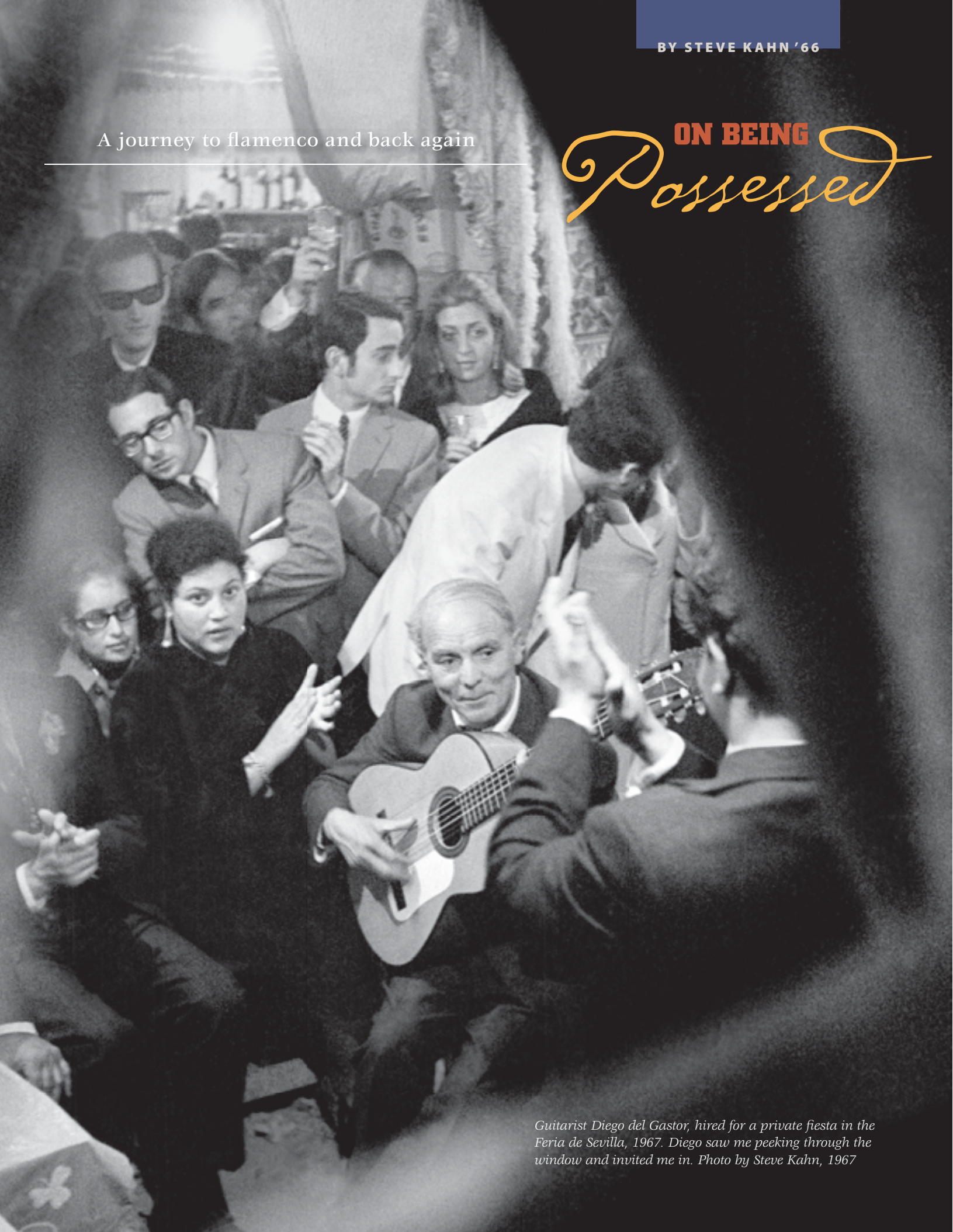
The Magic of Flamenco



BY STEVE KAHN '66

A journey to flamenco and back again

ON BEING *Possessed*



Guitarist Diego del Gastor, hired for a private fiesta in the Feria de Sevilla, 1967. Diego saw me peeking through the window and invited me in. Photo by Steve Kahn, 1967

It was late winter of 1968. I had been living for about a year in the small pueblo of Morón de la Frontera, in the Spanish province of Andalusia, and had made the usual friends that American guitar students make, gypsies and Spaniards alike. I also met Anzonini, a well-known flamenco dancer, and Rosa, his infamous girlfriend, who lived on a garlic farm outside the tiny village of Setenil de las Bodegas, somewhere in the mystical Andalusian countryside. One morning, a bunch of us, including my (then) wife, Virginia Gilmore '72, piled into our old army-green VW and headed off to their farm for an adventure.

Setenil is an isolated, ancient pueblo straddling a narrow, muddy riverbed in the foothills of the coastal range. Dwellings are built into natural recesses and cling to the base of sandstone cliffs that overhang the river. To get there we drove through endless, dreamy hours of dry air, dirt roads, and steep, rolling hills punctuated by the oldest of olive trees.

This was the landscape of flamenco, where the Roman, Moorish, Christian, and Jewish cultures collided and commingled during medieval times. That day Ginny and I were foreigners in the company of great musicians, ingloriously bumping along a winding, dusty path, shoulder to shoulder through a magical land. There was Diego, in his late fifties, pure gypsy, charismatic, wise, powerful, and brilliant, and his nephew, Fernandillo, something of a court jester or flamenco *festero*—he could dance, sing, tell stories and control the mood of any *fiesta*. We were going to visit Anzonini, another great *festero*. All were revered in the flamenco community.

Along the way we stopped for a campfire lunch at the site of a favorite sweet-water well, known only to Fernandillo and other gypsies who still traveled the old goat and horse trails of the backcountry. We were as far into Andalusia as I could ever have imagined, and by the time we arrived the spell was cast.

The farmhouse, a whitewashed, tile-roofed structure perched on the hillside, was primitive but welcoming. After a wonderful dinner and much to drink, Diego tuned up his guitar and the *fiesta* was on. Hours later, well after midnight, we were dozing in our chairs in the warm shadows of candlelight. Diego was playing *por bulerías*, a fast, driving form of flamenco, and his friend, a *cantaor* whose name I don't remember, started to sing.

As the song unfolded, something quite extraordinary began to happen in the room. It was as if the *cantaor* had, at that moment, tapped into some powerful, profound source of energy. It felt like he was singing way beyond his normal ability. Diego picked up on this immediately and played to it, driving him on, following him into the emotional vortex. We all tuned in to this extraordinary phenomenon taking place in our midst. I remember Anzonini, who had fallen asleep at the table, lifting his head from his arms, his body rising dreamlike but electrified from the chair, empowered by the music. He rises slowly, deliberately, and moves in perfect rhythm, moves *a compás*, not exactly dancing, but focused and intense, as the *cantaor* sings and Diego plays and the exploding rhythm takes us all into some other dimension.

Young gitana dancing in an outdoor juerga in the gypsy section of the Feria de Sevilla.

Photo by Steve Kahn, 1967



Flamenco is the music of Andalusia, or Al Andaluz, as it was called during the Moorish occupation (711–1492). It has its origins in Indian, Arabic, and indigenous cultures, and is frequently associated with the Spanish gypsies, although it is not limited to them. At the core of the particular flamenco I experienced, as practiced by the *gitanos* of Western Andalusia, lies *el cante jondo* or “deep song.” It is driven by complex rhythmical structures (*compás*), and wanders melodically within the relatively simple tonal range of the Phrygian mode. The words (*letras*) are like haiku—traditional verse to be interpreted by the singer (*cantaor*) and accompanied by guitar or often by rhythm alone. Like folk music the world over, the songs typically address eternal themes such as love, pain, loneliness, and death. Although now a commercially viable world-music genre, flamenco is still performed mostly in intimate gatherings of family and friends. It is a shared experience, drawing its energy from the group as well as the artists themselves. But it is more than just a musical experience. It is a way of life.



Great gypsey soleá cantaor Manolito de la María in Alcalá de Guadaíra. Photo by George Krause, 1963



Aurora Vargas dances for señoritos in a fiesta in Feria de Sevilla. Photo by Jane Grossenbacher, 1984

The song builds with such strength and passion that Anzonini appears to be drawn up from his table into the center of the room, like a genie called from its bottle. His eyes are wide and blazing blue and he's plugged into the same energy that possesses us all. He tosses a gesture here, a glance there, and it is clear that he *is compás*—he is *it*, the very soul of flamenco. When the song ends, and Diego quiets the strings, we are astonished and spent.

Such was my early experience of *duende*, the elusive yet powerful magic at the heart of flamenco. It came up out of the ground, out of the air, out of us all. There was nothing more to say. We crashed where each could find comfort. I remember how dark and quiet it was in the farmhouse that night, among the ancient olive trees and the fields of garlic.

My first real exposure to flamenco took place at Reed back in 1964. A classmate of mine, Chet Creider '65, had returned from a year studying flamenco guitar in Spain

and was performing in the old SU at a folksy orientation week talent show. In all honesty, I showed up more to meet freshman women than to listen to Chet, but that night changed my life. The music he played was different from anything I had ever heard before. It didn't just speak to me; it took hold of my soul and wouldn't let go.

Why it affected me so strongly, I don't know. The music was formally elegant and emotionally profound, conversational and inviting. It felt deeply rooted in the human condition and spoke volumes in a single note; intensely personal yet unpretentiously universal. It was the blues and jazz wrapped in an Indian raga. I was hooked.

I graduated from Reed as a physics major in 1966, and went to New York City to continue my studies. There I met David Serva, perhaps the most accomplished American flamenco guitarist working today. David had been to Morón, the epicenter of Andalusian flamenco, and encouraged me to make a pilgrimage there. Shortly thereafter, I had an ugly

encounter with the draft board that caused me to rethink my life choices. The war in Vietnam was in full swing, my student deferment had been revoked, and I was being called for duty. With calculated effort I failed the Army physical. The experience traumatized me, and for the first time, I felt that life was short.

I took a three-month leave of absence from my graduate work to travel to Spain, to seek out the great pueblo flamenco guitarist Diego Amaya Flores del Gastor. I was 23 years old; I had no idea how or even if the trip would work out. I had no reservations and no plans.

Before I flew to Spain, I joined thousands of other young people in various physical attire, body paint, and psychic states who converged on Central Park for the first "Be-In"—an uncensored, mind-bending, seminal event that ushered in the Love Generation. That was May Day, 1967. Hours later, on the flight to Madrid, I wondered if I should really be leaving the U.S. just when so many exciting things were happening.



Cantora Cristobalina singing in family fiesta following the gypsy baptism of Sebastian Peña Snow. Photo by Robert Klein, 1981

The next day, I stepped off a bus in Morón and into a romantic world of cobblestone streets, whitewashed walls, old women in eternal mourning, and smells of pueblo life—olive oil and garlic laced with the fragrance of orange blossoms and black tobacco. It was the antithesis of harsh, urban New York City.

Two young gypsy men sat at a table nearby, watching me with curious eyes as I stood conspicuously in black pants, beige corduroy jacket, white shirt, tie, and sunglasses, guitar case and bag in hand, looking foreign and lost.

Had I come to see Diego? they asked. We can take you to him. But look—here he comes now!

He was tall, somewhat stooped, wearing a threadbare black cotton suit with a white shirt buttoned at the neck, wispy silver-blond hair thinly trained over a clean forehead. I remember his worn, shiny-black, soft leather shoes. There were two children at his sides—a boy and a girl—and he walked slowly with his hands on each of their heads, fingers in their hair and a sparkle of warmth and pleasure in his eyes. He greeted me with a smile

and a bunch of questions and turned to walk me back up the street to Casa Pepe, the center of flamenco in Morón. So this was the great Diego del Gastor. I could hardly believe that I was actually there, walking up a street in what seemed to me another world—strange, dreamlike, yet very real and inviting. I knew I had made the right decision.

My three-month leave became a two-year immersion. I never returned to academic life. (Physics professor Nick Wheeler, my prescient senior thesis adviser, had actually predicted this.) The more I learned about flamenco, the more I wanted to learn. I just couldn't leave. Even with the lure of cultural and political change at home, there was nothing that compared to the intense high I was experiencing.

Over time, I got to know other artists, including singers Curro Mairena, Luis Torres "Joselero," and Juan Talegas, and guitarists Paco and Juan del Gastor, Diego Torres Amaya, and Agustin Rios. Diego's nephew Fernandillo would often come by our room to tell stories, share a *copita*, and entertain us.

Although formal guitar lessons were rare, getting together to make music was not. Sometimes Diego would just show up at my place to talk and play my guitar. He enjoyed the company of foreigners and was nourished by our attention. We in turn, brought him translations of Kafka and Erich Fromm, which he eagerly consumed, and hosted *fiestas* whenever life got a little dull. Sometimes we would pool our finances to hire *cantaoras* from neighboring towns, sometimes plucking them right from the fields, and bring them to Morón for fiestas that would last for days. One of the most memorable was the wedding party following my marriage to Ginny, who had taken time off from her studies in Paris to visit me in Spain. She, too, stayed.

It was a small fiesta, including a few friends of ours and Diego's, and the great *cantaoras*, La Fernanda and El Perrate, both of the nearby town of Utrera. It started in a bare, dirt-floor farmhouse on the edge of town among the olive groves, with food and drink from Casa Pepe, and segued to a Morón bar around seven the next morning.



The *aire* was so warm and celebratory that it felt like a family gathering. I recorded the music, which was absolutely extraordinary. The whole experience seemed to happen outside of time.

Back in the States I dropped out of academia to focus on photography (although I still play the guitar). In 2002, I was invited to participate in an exhibition illustrating an anthropology conference on flamenco in Granada. The event, "Sinmysterios de Flamenco," attracted much public attention and brought me back to Andalusia for the first time in 34 years. Inspired by the success of the show, I began wondering about the many candid photographs of the gypsy artists I had seen in Spain years before: photos tacked to walls or yellowed and gathering dust in broken glass frames, many of them taken by foreigners like me, evidence of a remarkable period of cultural exchange.

This curiosity was the beginning of the *Flamenco Project*, a seven-year effort on my part to locate, digitize, restore, archive, and publish photographs, audio recordings and films made by non-Spaniards, who came to Andalusia in pursuit of Flamenco during that unique window of opportunity between 1960 and 1985. It was motivated partly by a need to preserve memories of that time and partly by my desire to bring my photography and music together at that point of my life.

The *fiestas* were the high points of the musical experience. A few of us had tape recorders and made audio recordings. (In most cases, discreet taping was accepted by the artists, and it was often encouraged by them.) We also took photographs, mostly amateur snaps, but many that were extraordinary.

Looking back on those years, I realize that we had privileged and unprecedented access to the inner circles of flamenco life. We were not a political or social threat to the gypsies, and were passionately supportive of the music. An anomaly in the fabric of daily life, we were a complement to the artists' world, creating an unusual place

for ourselves in their social sphere. In fact, aside from the monumental 1970s documentary film project *Rito y Geografía del Cante* and the occasional local radio station's festival recordings, most of the surviving documentation of that era comes from foreigners. The Flamenco Project has archived over 150 images by 17 photographers, 4 original fiesta recordings, and 2 films.

Non-Spaniards still venture to Andalusia, continuing to enjoy the music, and to record and photograph emerging artists. Yet the flamenco lifestyle and Spanish culture in general has changed so dramatically over the years that the kind of experience we had in the 60s and 70s just isn't possible now. Not only is Spain considerably more expensive, but the music itself has become more commercial and the artists, less available. Moreover, the flow of cultural and musical influence has reversed course; flamenco has embraced jazz and even hip-hop as major influences.

In order to research the Flamenco Project, I have made numerous trips to Spain over the past seven years. Even though I'm ostensibly looking for photographs, I always bring my guitar along. What I have discovered is a younger generation of gypsy guitarists who now look to me for material, because I was there during a period they recognize as one of the golden ages of flamenco. They find it remarkable that I still play the music of their great-uncle Diego who died in 1973, and that I learned it one-on-one from the source, before they were even born. They ask me how the old man played this and that, since I was actually there and hopefully remember. Many are learning from the very tapes that we foreigners had the foresight to record years ago. Now I have a chance to give something back, to pass the wisdom of my teacher along to the artists of the future. It is an extraordinary reversal of roles, rewarding beyond measure.

Steve Kahn '66 is a New York (Brooklyn) based, internationally known commercial and fine art photographer. A flamenco guitarist for over 45 years, he remains one of a handful of musicians still playing the Morón toque (style).

Flamenco PROJECT

The project features 150 images by 17 photographers, 4 original fiesta recordings, and 2 films, all taken or recorded between 1960 and 1985. Together, these documents create a picture of flamenco life, experienced through the eyes and ears of involved foreigners who came to witness the intimate moments of joy and pain expressed in the art of flamenco. The photographs include informal portraits of artists, presented not necessarily at their manicured best, but rather unprepared and unscripted, more honest, perhaps, more revealing than what one might expect. The documents reflect an outsider's perspective on pueblo life, portraying flamenco in its original context.

The project opened its inaugural exhibition in Jerez de la Frontera in December 2008, kicking off a two-year, exclusive sponsorship by the Andalusian bank and cultural foundation Cajasol | Obra Social. The next show opens in Sevilla on September 19, 2009, and a book will be available in early 2010. International venues are in the making. For more information, visit www.flamencoproject.com.

Further Reading, Listening and Viewing:

The Wind Cried by Paul Hecht
(Dial Press 1968)

The Flamencos of Cadiz Bay
by Gerald Howson (Hutchinson 1965)

A Way of Life by D.E. Pohren
(Bold Strummer 1980)

The Art of Flamenco by D.E. Pohren
(Society of Spanish Studies 1967)

Flamenco de la Frontera by Paco del Gastor,
(CD, Nimbus Records)

Cante Flamenco by Paco del Gastor
(CD, Nimbus Records)

Cante Gitano by Paco del Gastor,
(CD, Nimbus Records)

Son de la Frontera (CD, World Village USA)

Morón y su Compás (DVD, OffSevilla)

El Angel: Musical Flamenco. (DVD,
El Flamenco Vive)

Rito y Geografía del Toque (DVD)
(Alga Editores, S.L)