



Monica Bermudez (right), one of the Bay Area's premiere flamenco entertainers, performs with Yaelisa, an Emmy Award-winning choreographer, at Bolero in Larkspur.

LIZ HAFALIN / The Chronicle

FLAMENCO ENJOYS THE BAY AREA BEAT

By Jon B. Rhine
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Considering San Francisco's Spanish heritage, Mediterranean climate and tradition of embracing bohemian art, it's fitting that flamenco music — with its Andalusian Gypsy roots — should settle here, too.

With an 80-year legacy in Spanish dance, the city is home to a booming flamenco scene with more aficionados, nightclubs, dancers and guitarists than almost any place outside of Seville.

Flamenco, with its percussive dancing, soulful vocals and biting guitar, is a tapestry of Moorish, Sephardic, Gypsy and Spanish folk traditions. It has attracted an international following, prompting fans and artists to describe it in mystical terms. Guitarists refer less to a song's notes than to its "aire" or "ambiente." Fans speak of their discovery of the music as a "baptism," while poet Garcia Lorca evokes the mood of "duende," the spirit that possesses its performers, in his "Gypsy Ballads."

An austere 1930s building on Oak Street has become the "cathedral" of flamenco dance and the heartbeat of the thriving local scene. Six days a week, professionals and beginners alike gather in the corridor for evening classes. A few times a month a salesman brings his trunk to the hall to sell fans, shoes, castanets and colorful lace mantones.

Flamenco Heaven

For 28-year-old Marius Wolfe, who is studying on a Canadian arts grant, San Francisco is flamenco heaven.

"I can get good instruction here and I don't have to go to

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Spain," Wolfe says. The Vancouver resident, already a professional back home, has been studying with local dancer and Emmy Award-winning choreographer Yaelisa, a second-generation flamenco dancer. "I find it so much more stimulating here because the students are committed," Wolfe says. "There are shows, visiting artists from Spain, the scene is very current. It has everything — not just classes."

Thundering Feet

Inside one cavernous studio, Monica Bermudez, a raven-haired woman with piercing green eyes and a nobly erect carriage that comes from years of flamenco dance, stands before three rows of students to signal the start of class. They do drills on the precise footwork, arm movements and hand flourishes that look so unrehearsed on the stage. The sound of 20 pairs of feet hammering the floor thunders through the

room as the guitarist tears into the strings.

"I have been dancing since I was 8 years old," Bermudez says. "A lot of people didn't know about flamenco then. They used to say 'flamingo' — they thought it had something to do with Las Vegas."

The San Francisco native has studied and performed extensively in Spain, including at Seville's Bienal, the single-largest flamenco festival in the country. Like most Bay Area flamenco performers, Bermudez divides her time between teaching and performing.

On Fridays and Saturdays, she treks across the Golden Gate to Bolero, a lavish flamenco venue in Larkspur opened a year ago by a Madrid restaurateur. Inside the former brick factory, Bolero has the rustic subterranean ambience of a Gypsy cave in Granada's Sacromonte district. Tables are set through the narrow passageway that once served as a kiln for bricks used to rebuild San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake. Past the bar, people are packed into one end of the tunnel, which widens to where the stage is set.

Seasoned Dancers

Bermudez and her troupe of seasoned Bay Area flamenco dancers enter the stage from a tiny arched doorway. A number of aficionados and dance students yell out jaleos (Spanish quips meant to encourage the performers) as the dancers build momentum. Shouts of "ole," the universal word of praise in Spain, to "alza" (pick it up) rise above the performers' staccato clapping.

San Francisco, meanwhile, offers a range of possibilities for the flamenco fan seeking an Iberian experience, or anyone just looking for an alternative to the nightclub scene.

Sol Y Luna nightclub in the Financial District offers Madrid-style flamenco as polished and professional as can be found in Spain. For the past five years, house performers have done dinner shows on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday nights, backed by guitarist Don Fontowitz (who has toured with Ottmar Liebert) and accompanied by Rosa Montoya. Spaniard

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MONICA BERMUDEZ
FLAMENCO DANCER

Jose "El Grillo" Blanco provides gritty vocals while Fibi Vernier and guest dancers mesmerize the crowd in a swirl of skirts.

The Spanish restaurant Alegrias on Lombard Street hosts a flamenco guitarist on weekends who sets the proper mood for an imaginary trip to Andalusia.

La Bodega, a North Beach flamenco institution, continues to present nightly shows led by veteran Spaghetti Factory flamenco dancer Ernesto Hernandez, who tailors his show to suit the mood of the room. The recently expanded restaurant packs in tourists and locals alike, and the atmosphere gets raucous on weekends.

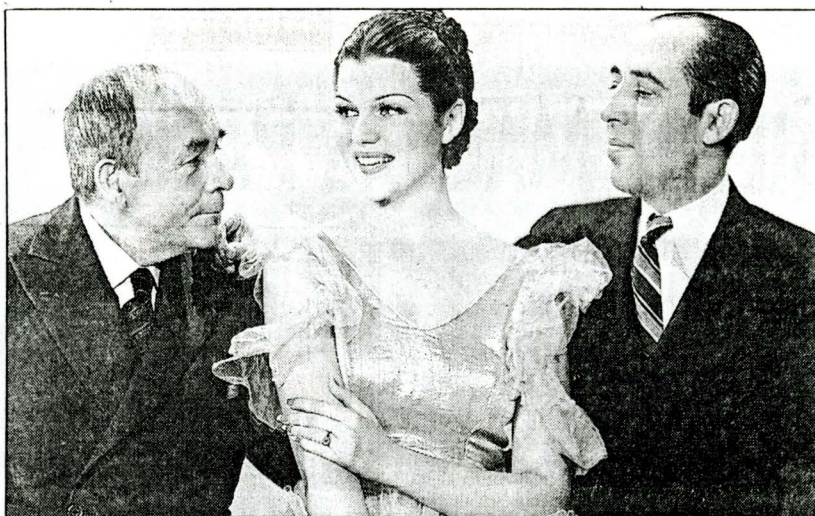
Scores of Teachers

Besides clubs, scores of flamenco dance instructors and guitar teachers are active throughout the Bay Area. A good source for information is the Web site at www.flamenco.org. There's also the Journal of Flamenco Artistry, a Santa Monica-based magazine that offers interviews, record reviews and profiles of California flamenco dancers, as well as arcane discussions of flamenco's meaning and origins. Its e-mail address is elbugre@gte.net; or call (310) 394-2317. ■

WHERE TO FIND FLAMENCO

Bay Area venues for flamenco include:

- Bolero, 125 E. Sir Francis Drake Blvd., Larkspur, (415) 925-9392. Shows: 7:30, 8:30 and 9:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays.
- Sol Y Luna, 475 Sacramento St., San Francisco, (415) 296-8191. Shows: 8 and 9:30 p.m. Wednesdays and Fridays; 7, 8 and 9:30 p.m. Saturdays.
- Alegrias Restaurant, 2018 Lombard St., San Francisco, (415) 929-8888. Flamenco guitarist (no dancers) after 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays.
- La Bodega, 1337 Grant Ave., San Francisco, (415) 433-0439. Shows: 8 and 9:30 p.m. Monday through Friday; 7:30, 9:30 and 10:30 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays.



Members of the dancing Cansino clan, which included Antonio, Rita and Edouardo, had a flamenco dance studio on Geary Street. Rita Cansino later became an actress and changed her name to Rita Hayworth.

FLAMENCO ROOTS GO DEEP IN S.F.

By Jon B. Rhine
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

While the homegrown flamenco scene may be exploding in popularity, its history in San Francisco runs deep.

From the turn of the century, touring vaudeville shows regularly featured "Spanish dancers." One of the most celebrated performers of the time was Ohio-born Estrellita, who toured throughout Europe and the United States with her Spanish husband. Estrellita's theatrical interpretation flamenco dances, including fandangos, Sevillanas and tangos, appealed to American audiences.

The 1915 Pan-Pacific Exposition gave audiences a glimpse of Spanish cafe society in its "Streets of Sevilla" attraction along a seven-block stretch of Fillmore Street. Estrellita sang and danced for thousands in a tableau that featured a Moorish-style patio and cafe and even a bullring complete with bulls. Estrellita gave her final performances in San Francisco in the '20s before retiring to Piedmont.

By the 1930s San Francisco was a regular destination for touring flamenco troupes who had fled the Spanish Civil War. Carmen Amaya, Juan Martinez with guitarist Carlos Montoya, and Vicente Escudero were just a few of the notables who performed regularly in San Francisco.

Some excellent teachers elected to stay in the city. Jose Cansino and his sister Elisa tapped the enthusiasm of locals eager to learn "bailes de figura" and flamenco styles when the two opened their dance studio next to the Curran Theatre in the early '30s. Dancing was a tradition and a vocation for the Cansino clan, whose patriarch, Antonio Cansino, had danced in cafes and tavernas from Seville to Madrid. Margarita Cansino, later known as Rita Hayworth, started her show-business career dancing with her father, Eduardo.

For more than 40 years Jose Ramon's dance studio was like a slice of Spain set down in San Francisco. Originally from Juneda, Spain, Ramon settled in San Francisco in 1944 after dancing his way across Europe and the United States with vaudeville troupes. Before coming to the city Ramon danced for several years in Hollywood nightclubs and worked as an extra in movies such as "Blood and Sand," in which his rapid fire footwork doubled for Tyrone Power. On his 90th birthday this year, Ramon was awarded a commendation by Mayor Willie Brown for his contribution to the arts in San Francisco.

In the 1950s flamenco became popular with the hipsters and Beats of North Beach. Flamenco dance and guitar became a regular supporting act at the hungry i and Purple Onion between sets by comic Lenny Bruce.

Soon the original La Bodega on Columbus Avenue, where Jazz at Pearl's is now, became flamenco central in North Beach and a magnet for aspiring flamenco guitarists and dancers from around the country. La Bodega founders Harry and Lynn Clarke wanted to re-create the tapa bars they had seen in Spain.

"In those days everybody had a guitar on their back and wanted to play 'Greensleeves,'" Harry Clarke says, recalling the challenge of finding flamenco guitarists.

Mariano Cordoba's arrival in 1956 was perfectly timed. "Very soon I had more students than I could handle. We couldn't find enough guitars," Cordoba recalls about the early days of his 40-year career as a teacher. Cordoba's own apprenticeship as a guitarist began at 12, accompanying singers who passed the hat among patrons of Madrid's smoke-filled working-class taverns.

"The flamencos then were considered low-class, lazy people until society discovered how difficult and wonderful an art it is," Cordoba says.

Eventually more flamenco clubs sprouted around North Beach. The Old Spaghetti Factory, backed by Fred Kuh, began the longest run of any flamenco venue in the city in 1959; it closed in 1985.

Cruz Luna emerged as a local star, and performed in North Beach clubs and on "The Ed Sullivan Show" before opening Casa Madrid in 1960. Casa Madrid's flamenco show, featuring Rosa Montoya, her partner Ciro, and guitarist Adonis Puertas, all Gypsies from Spain, gave local audiences a taste of the flinty, spontaneous brand of flamenco rarely seen outside of Spain.

After 25 years of teaching at her Center of Spanish Dance and Flamenco in the Mission and at San Francisco State University, as well as presenting her annual performances, Montoya is still passionate about flamenco.

"I work very hard to help people understand the energy and the emotion of flamenco. It doesn't matter whether they know flamenco or not. I tell people to feel the music," she says.

In 1958 Donn Pohren opened one of the first U.S. flamenco "tablaos" — a venue that serves dinner with a flamenco show — in a ship barn near McNear Beach on San Pablo Bay in Marin County. The Rincon Flamenco packed 500 people into the old barn on the first night, Pohren recalls.

"We were completely unprepared. Opening night was chaos," Pohren said.

The '70s also saw a fresh infusion of talent when three Gypsies from Andalusia arrived, sparking a round of "juergas" — a spontaneous party with too many people squeezed into a small San Francisco apartment fueled by several gallons of red wine. Agustin Rios, Azonini del Puerto and Diegito were veteran flamenco musicians from Moron de la Frontera. Rios still lives in the East Bay, where he teaches dance, guitar and singing. ■



Cruz Luna was a local star in the '50s.