

FLAMENCO GALLERY

As seen by James Yohai

Alberto Velez was born in Huelva, Andalucia, into a guitaristic family; while very young began to learn the guitar and thus acquired enough technique in the classical style to become a recitalist, a factor which gave him a great advantage over most of his contemporaries in the field of flamenco—who, of course, played “by ear”—so that, when he decided to become a flamenco guitarist, it was not long before his fame spread throughout Andalucia.

On settling in Madrid he soon established himself; the best dancers and singers began to rely on his accompanimental skill; he became regarded as one of the foremost flamenco guitarists in the country, and was called “the guitarist with the gentle touch”, because of his sweet, clear tone.

Velez is one of the most versatile guitarists I have heard; and his knowledge of the flamenco repertoire is complete, for he has studied every item in it, having appeared successfully all over the world as principal guitarist to famous Spanish Ballet companies.

It was a great pleasure to meet him for the first time, when he appeared at the Margarita Restaurant here in London, a few years ago, accompanying the well-known dancers Raquel and Margarita, and singer Paco Victory.

Such was his popularity that many professional flamenco guitarists took lessons from him to improve technique and extend their repertoire. Every night the Margarita was packed with an audience of flamenco *aficionados* and professional guitarists, many of whom decided, on hearing Velez, to take lessons from him in order to improve their technique and extend their repertoire.

Velez is the permanent guitarist in all appearances of his wife Raquel (an excellent dancer) and the pair delighted audiences at the Margarita with many exciting performances.

Outstanding among his many recordings with famous flamenco stars is perhaps the one made with his friend, the world-famous guitarist, Mario Escudero.

I regard it as a great honour to have

met Velez and I am proud to include him in my flamenco gallery.

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Maruja de Cordoba (born in Cordoba, Andalucia) began as a little girl to learn flamenco dancing in the heart of “flamenco country” and soon established herself as a great interpreter of the flamenco art, becoming a professional dancer at the age of fifteen, she began to tour the major cities with flamenco groups and famous ballet companies. Successful engagements in the best theatres and *Tablados Flamencos* of Madrid were soon followed by tours of Europe and the Middle East, before she decided nine years ago to perform in England, eventually joining the ballet company of Rafael de Sevilla in London, as principal dancer.

Having appeared with many flamenco groups in almost every Spanish Restaurant in London, Maruja de Cordoba is considered to be one of the finest and most versatile of dancers. With her great knowledge of every item in the flamenco repertoire she keeps a perfect *compas* in all her dances; and her best items are the *Alegrías*, *Soleares* and *Seguiriyas*. Maruja de Cordoba can with justice be called a perfect dancer.

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I would now like to pay homage to the memory of two singers whose names are illustrious in the gallery of flamenco—the brothers **Carlos** and **Ernesto Basiliscu** who died recently, within the period of one week.

When Carlos and Ernesto came to this country from Gibraltar, their birthplace, flamenco was virtually unknown in England. The current popularity of the art form here had its origins in the unceasing efforts of these two pioneers over twenty years ago.

Carlos was the first of the two to reach England, bringing with him his son Lionel to help in his search for flamenco guitarists and dancers in

order to form a group to popularise flamenco over here.

By 1954, through the efforts of Carlos and his son, Flamenco Bars and restaurants began opening. One of the first proprietors to feature a group of flamenco artists was Pepe Solsona, of the Casa Pepe Restaurant. The Millo brothers' Acapulco Bar came next; then the Margarita, followed by many others.

Ernesto Basiliscu, meanwhile, had come to London to sing flamenco, as Carlos had done before him, and it is largely due to this indefatigable duo that we now have so many “spots” in London where flamenco can be heard to advantage.

Many professional flamenco singers, dancers and guitarists owe their experience to the Basiliscu brothers, from whom they learned so much.

Other members of the Basiliscu family came along to add their contribution to the flamenco art: Ernesto's son, Guillermo, and Carlos's grandson, Tito became known and were soon regarded as two of the best flamenco guitarists in England, playing for the greatest singers and dancers in this country.

Guillermo Basiliscu plays with the famous Paco Peña and his Flamenco Puro group, accompanying such excellent singers as Sordera and Barelito; and Margarita and Faikillo, the dancers.

Tito has for many years been the accompanist of Rafael de Sevilla, and now plays for the versatile singer and dancer Teresa Sacromonte.

Carlos's son, Lionel, is in Wellington, New Zealand, where he has opened a Spanish restaurant at which he leads his own flamenco group.

It will be realised that the efforts of Carlos and Ernesto Basiliscu have indeed resulted in great popularity for flamenco in England. From their devotion to that cause springs the proof of their labour, and though all flamenco lovers will mourn their sad passing, the public esteem in which flamenco is now held here is itself a memorial to those talented singers.